

FEMINIZED COUNSEL
AND THE LITERATURE OF ADVICE
IN ENGLAND, 1380–1500

DISPUTATIO

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FEMINIZED COUNSEL
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IN ENGLAND, 1380–1500

Misty Schieberle



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To Happy, Dee Ann,
and Michael

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INTRODUCTION

So mai a man be reson taste,
Hou next after the God above
The trouthe of wommen and the love,
In whom that alle grace is founde,
Is myhtiest upon this grounde
And most behovely manyfold.

John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, VII.1944–49

In Book VII of the *Confessio Amantis*, Gower makes a curious change to his source for the story *King, Wine, Woman and Truth*. It is a change that opens a window onto a little-noticed literary figure that appears in a cluster of Middle English texts at the end of the fourteenth century and during the fifteenth century: the figure of the woman counsellor. This figure not only breaks with tradition by representing women as wise advisers, but it also plays a key role in the construction of vernacular poetry as a medium for advising princes. Gower's story, which is derived from the biblical book of Esdras, describes a contest in which three of King Darius's counsellors must determine whether king, wine, or woman possesses the most strength. In the biblical version, all three earthly choices are rejected as wicked in favour of 'truth' as the correct answer. But Gower alters the ending of the story in the *Confessio*.¹ In his version, the counsellor Zorobabel

¹ III Esdras 4. 37 explicitly asserts, 'Wine is wicked, the king is wicked, women are wicked, all the children of men are wicked, and such are all their wicked works; and there is no truth in them.' The earlier version in Gower, *Mirour de L'Omme*, trans. by Wilson, ll. 22765–800, like Esdras, represents woman negatively, but Gower even further distances 'woman', the second response given, from the final answer 'truth', which is delivered by a fourth counsellor. See also Burke, 'The Sources and Significance of the "Tale of King, Wine, Woman, and Truth"', pp. 4–8. Mirk, *Festial*, ed. by Powell, II, p. 267–68, also gives an antifeminist reading of the Esdras narrative and the example of a lover who influences a king's behaviour: Mirk aligns the woman with lechery, which leads a man to disgrace and death. I am grateful to Holly Johnson for this reference; see also Johnson, *The Grammar of Good Friday*, pp. 230–39, for another sermon that allegorizes all three answers as elements of the Passion.

gives the winning answer: ‘woman’, particularly the ‘trouthe of wommen and the love | In whom that alle grace is founde’ (vii.1946–47). Zorobabel supports his point with two specific exempla that illustrate women’s strength and love.² The first describes Apemen, the ‘lemman’ of the tyrant Cyrus, who mollifies his bad behaviour by quenching his anger and making him ‘debonaire and meke’ through her love (vii.1884–99).³ The second tells the story of the mythological character Alcestis, who sacrificed her life so that her husband king Admetus might live (vii.1917–43). Like the Esdras narrative, Zorobabel concludes that truth is the mightiest force, but he uses the stories of Apemen and Alcestis to exemplify truth and to forge a distinctive connection between truth and women.

Moreover, by telling two exempla in which women sway the fate of the king and kingdom for the better, Zorobabel argues that feminine influence is crucial to ideal kingship. For Gower, *King, Wine, Woman, and Truth* has a double function. First, Zorobabel’s answer models the process of advising princes that Gower himself deploys in the *Confessio* overall: ethics are derived from historical and literary exempla that illustrate moral principles — here, the connection between women and truth. Second, the story embeds an image of feminine counsel within its account of ethical advising in the figures of Apemen and Alcestis, both of whom support and advise kings. The conclusion of Gower’s exemplum — that women and truth are intimately bound together — strongly implies that counsel itself is a feminized practice, a relationship between a subordinate adviser and a masculine ruler that enables wisdom, or ‘trouthe’. As I will argue in this book, the connection between women and truth that Gower articulates here is not exclusive to him; various writers, including Chaucer, from the late fourteenth century and fifteenth century found in the notion of feminine counsel a compelling image for their own writing.

Such a close alignment of women and truth in counsel reverses expectations, because few male authors of authoritative texts associated advice, much less truth, with women. Clerical, antifeminist depictions of women were far more common. The closest analogues that link women with counsel and truth appear as allegorical personifications, such as Boethius’s *Philosophia* in *De consolazione Philosophiae* or Alan of Lille’s *Natura* in *De planctu Naturae*. The relationship of personifications to gender, however, is limited because it stems from grammatical gender, not the desire to represent an authoritative woman. In fact, in the *Anticlaudianus*

² His predecessors’ responses were more general: Arpaghes cites the king’s supreme power unrestrained by anything but his own self-control (vii.1824–48), and Manachaz notes wine’s physical effect on man and its role in the salvific rite of communion (vii.1849–71).

³ The Latin marginalia identifies Apemen as the daughter of Besazis and concubine to Cyrus, king of Persia, who influenced Cyrus in front of the whole court (vii.1884n).

(c. 1181–84), Alan of Lille specifically distances personifications from womanhood by asserting that his *Arithmetica* possesses authority only because ‘with her man-like mind she transcends her sex [...] A man by intelligence, a woman by sex [...] in mental capacity, she is not a “she” but a “he”’.⁴ Alan denies that *Arithmetica* should be considered a woman in order to secure the figure’s authority and to correct any misapprehensions by readers. He expresses a conventional sentiment about gender roles — that women are inherently inferior to men — and we might expect it to hold true across the board for medieval literary practice.⁵

Yet, as Gower’s *King, Wine, Woman, and Truth* illustrates, in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, something unique occurs in vernacular literature that draws on the tradition of mirrors for princes to provide advice through exempla. In these narratives, women become noticeably aligned with truth and counsel, and, even more remarkably, they also become ideal counsellors who direct aristocratic men to exercise moral and political virtues. Just as Zorobabel uses women to exemplify truth, Gower and other late medieval poets developed women characters to represent a specific kind of truth: counsel to kings. In Gower’s *Confessio* (1386–93), Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women* (1386–94) and *Melibee* (c. 1385), and Middle English translations of Christine de Pizan’s *Epistre Othea* (1399–1400) by Stephen Scrope (c. 1440) and an anonymous translator (c. 1450), women play prominent roles as authoritative counsellors to kings, to princes, and even to Cupid as the God of Love. When authors articulate this instruction through female voices, the process of advising itself is feminized, and the female counsellor emerges as a significant literary figure—as an outlet through which poets address challenging political questions. By using women counsellors to think through issues such as kingship and tyranny, mercy and justice, humility and pride, patience and impatience, among others, poets also invited their audiences to rethink power dynamics, particularly the roles of women and lay poets in the definition of good governance. Translations and

⁴ Alan of Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, trans. by Sheridan, pp. 103–07.

⁵ Even with the shift to vernacular personification allegories such as Jean de Meun’s *Romance of the Rose* (c. 1275) and William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* (c. 1360s–1387), male poets demonstrate an uneasiness with featuring a *woman* (rather than a personification) as an authority figure. Jean focuses on the universal level in which human gender is ultimately irrelevant in order to maintain the authority of Reason and Natura after the Dreamer or Genius calls attention to their female gender (ll. 6928–43, 16323–401). As Raskolnikov, *Body Against Soul*, pp. 175–77, has shown, Langland ‘disinvites’ female allegorical advisers and prefers male allegorical figures even for traditionally female ones such as the liberal arts and Nature; see also Cooper, ‘Gender and Personification in *Piers Plowman*’, pp. 31–48.

adaptations of these works also enabled later producers of literary texts such as an unnamed scribe-editor of the *Melibee* and the Middle English translators of the *Othea* to engage the woman counsellor in response to their own pressing questions about Fortune, chivalric virtues, and political crises. By the late fifteenth century, the association of women with essential political counsel was a concept widely available to readers, for whom it could transform not only views of how political processes should ideally function but also views of women and authority.

The appearance of feminized counsel in works by Chaucer and Gower marks a departure from traditional representations of women in either historical or literary texts, including conduct manuals designed to give advice to princes. Such texts necessarily tended to emphasize a masculine perspective, exclude feminine voices, or, more tellingly, represent women negatively. The widely popular pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum secretorum* and Giles of Rome's *De regimine principum* mention women primarily in references to sex, feebleness, or dangers to avoid, and close English translations follow suit.⁶ Finding women, therefore, as political counsellors to kings and aristocratic lords in vernacular literature has important implications for how we view the development of vernacular political discourses, the status of women, and the role of the poet as the author of advice literature. While Judith Ferster, John Watts, and others have explored the history of counsel as it appears in mirrors for princes, and Larry Scanlon has demonstrated that the exemplum allows authors to transmit social ideologies and develop the authority to engage political crises, no one has yet explored the link between vernacular advice to princes texts and the representation of women as counsellors to kings.⁷ Likewise, although scholars have examined women in these works, rarely do they consider women's impact on the text's political aspects or on the counsel that the author provides. Important exceptions include the studies by Paul Strohm and David Wallace that demonstrate the petitionary influence of queens or prominent wives over their husbands, and Jill Mann's argument that the exercise of traditionally feminine qualities characterizes Chaucer's ideal male leaders.⁸ *Feminized Counsel* builds on these studies to analyse how authors

⁶ These representations are discussed in more detail in Chapter 1.

⁷ Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*; Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship*; and Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority and Power*.

⁸ Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, pp. 95–119; Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, pp. 212–46; and Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, pp. 95–99, 129–42. See also Bullón-Fernández, *Fathers and Daughters in John Gower's Confessio Amantis*, for a different exploration of ties between the family and the state. More political work has been done on Christine de Pizan's *Othea* but not on the Middle English versions; see, for example, Hindman, *Christine de Pizan's Epistre Othea*; Forhan, *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan*; and Green, 'On Translating Christine as a Philosopher'.

develop authority for fictional women as political counsellors and how that process reflects on the author's own project of advice-giving and self-authorization. Because the emergence of women counsellors as authority figures coincides with the vernacularization of mirrors for princes, one aim of this project is to understand this move as part of the broadening of authority beyond traditional Latinate and masculine models. Women counsellors became effective personae that allowed advising poets to acknowledge their own perceived lack of authority and status in order to address political topics safely, but they also enabled those poets to argue that good advice can come from any source, which results in the elevation of the status of women and vernacular texts simultaneously.

Not all the texts in this study strictly correspond to the genre of 'mirrors for princes'. Rather, they represent descendants of the tradition that often make significant innovations to accommodate a vernacular audience.⁹ The works under consideration here have the following characteristics in common: they draw on Aristotle, Giles, or other notable authorities; they discuss political and social ideals; and they rely upon the exemplum to illustrate virtuous behaviour, a pedagogical method that is crucial both to the success of the work and to understanding its inventive visions of women and authority. The *Confessio*, the *Melibee*, and the *Othea* have pedigrees rooted in mirrors for princes and related authoritative works on kingship.¹⁰ Although the *Legend of Good Women* does not engage the tradition in the same way, scholars have long seen in the ethical and political topics of the *Prologue* a tone familiar from princely advice literature, and the legends offer exemplars of male and female behaviours.¹¹ All of these texts, even if

Yet even the *Othea* receives limited attention compared to Christine's other works.

⁹ Narrow definitions of the mirror genre include only texts in Latin written for aristocratic patrons by ecclesiastical writers who borrowed from Aristotle — works categorized as 'moral theology' or 'ethical politics', or even 'political theology', for secular readers; see Genet, 'Ecclesiastics and Political Theory in Late Medieval England', pp. 23–27; and Briggs, *Giles of Rome's De Regimine Principum*, p. 45. Yet the narrow model problematically excludes vernacular poets like Lydgate, who fits the definition except that he does not write in Latin, whereas the broadest model would include any work that depicts or discusses a king, whether or not it was directed to an aristocratic reader or drew consciously on the established mirror tradition. In selecting my texts, I have sought a middle ground of works that draw fairly directly on the mirrors for princes tradition.

¹⁰ Scholars debate whether the *Melibee* is a mirror for princes, but Chaucer's French predecessor Renaud de Louens, 'Le Livre de Mellibee et Prudence', ed. by Askins, p. 331, treated it as one dedicated to his patroness for the education of her sons and other princes.

¹¹ See Schlauch, 'Chaucer's Doctrine of Kings and Tyrants', pp. 150–54; and St John, *Chaucer's Dream Visions*, pp. 182–93.

originally written within a mirrors for princes framework or for an aristocratic audience, were later transmitted to broader audiences that included gentry readers and women. Mirrors for princes have always transmitted cultural ideology, not just advice to rulers, and these works became part of the growing body of vernacular conduct manuals that articulated a set of collective ideals and expectations for society.¹² Evaluations of the translations of the *Othea* are particularly useful in this light, because Stephen Scrope's *Epistle of Othea* and the independently produced *Lytil Bibell of Knyghthod* demonstrate how English writers approached Christine's ideas as they wrote for aristocrats, gentry, women readers, and audiences perhaps more in need of a chivalric conduct manual than a mirror for princes.¹³ As women are represented as political counsellors and as exemplars for men and women, new conceptions emerge of gender and authority as flexible and performative.

Queenly Intercession and Political Instability

Historically speaking, the late fourteenth-century atmosphere was ripe for both advocating political reform and imagining women who intervene in royal decision-making. Crises of kingship and counsel during Richard II's reign are well-documented, and it is not necessary to rehearse them here, but I wish to emphasize that during the times that the king needed counsel most, the government had enacted strong restrictions against counsel and against criticism of royal authority. Legislations, such as the *scandalum mandatum* and other laws that equated criticism or counsel with treason, made it dangerous for subjects to broach political topics, even in poetry. The need for a subtle method of counselling kingship was evident during the reign of Richard II, and it continued to deepen during the Lancastrian era and Wars of the Roses.¹⁴

¹² Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority and Power*, pp. 80–87, is the first to consider form and function together. See also, on rhetorical function, Kemmler, 'Exempla' in Context, pp. 60–67, 155–92.

¹³ On these translations, see Scrope, *The Epistle of Othea*, ed. by Bühler, pp. xviii–xxi; *A 'Lytil Bibell of Knyghthod'*, ed. by Gordon, pp. xxxi–lxiii; and Chapter 4, below. On the broad appeal of conduct manuals, see Ashley and Clark, *Medieval Conduct*, for a number of essays on non-aristocratic audiences who were eager to learn aristocratic manners and virtues.

¹⁴ For studies of the English periods and conflicts in question, see McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century*; Saul, *Richard II*; Walker, *Political Culture in Later Medieval England*; and Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship*. For specific details on restrictive legislation that made critique of the king dangerous, see also Grudin, *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse*, pp. 21–25;

But if the political era in which Chaucer and Gower lived set into motion the major fourteenth-century and fifteenth-century concerns with counsel and kingship, it also offered such poets a productive means to imagine the king's reform without threatening his personal, monarchical authority: queenly intercession. As historical evidence has shown, late medieval women might exercise influence or power, but even queens rarely exercised public authority, which was reserved for men and defined as possessing the *independent* ability to control events or put one's desires into action.¹⁵ Nevertheless there are prominent historical examples in which the queen exerts a significant influence on the king, such as Queen Philippa interceding with Edward III on behalf of the Burgurers of Calais that he wished to execute, and Anne of Bohemia intervening to convince Richard II to reconcile with the City of London or spare John Northampton. The chronicle depictions of these events evoke Marian intercession and a loving spousal relationship in order to explain the queen's ability to soften the king's irascibility or pride and to persuade him toward a more gracious, measured solution.¹⁶ What these and other similar accounts have in common is the queen's performance of a ritual scripted to demonstrate submission (often through kneeling or prostration), engender mercy, and permit the king to change his mind without losing face. Much more than romanticized accounts of the royal marital relationship, these narratives establish a performance of feminization that contrasts the queen's humility with the king's masculine authority. Because the request for modifying his behaviour comes from his deferential queen, who lacks authority, the king retains authority while the queen can successfully petition him to alter his course of action.¹⁷

and Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict*, pp. 8–13, 31–37, and, on the tragic case of the poet and civil servant Thomas Usk, pp. 112–26.

¹⁵ Bennett, 'Public Power and Authority in the Medieval English Countryside', pp. 28–29.

¹⁶ Philippa's intercession appears in Froissart, *Chronicles*, ed. and trans. by Jolliffe, pp. 156–57; Anne's negotiation on behalf of the City of London is the subject of Maidstone, *Concordia*, ed. by Carlson, and her plea on behalf of Northampton appears in *The Westminster Chronicle*, ed. and trans. by Hector and Harvey, pp. 92–95. Interventions by Philippa, Anne, and even Richard's mother, Joan, who exercised intercessory powers as princess of Wales and queen mother are described in *The Westminster Chronicle*, ed. and trans. by Hector and Harvey, pp. 114, 503; and *The St Albans Chronicle*, ed. and trans. by Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, p. 750. See also McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century*, pp. 344, 425, 439; Saul, *Richard II*, pp. 133 and 456. Parsons, 'The Pregnant Queen as Counselor', pp. 44–49, shows that Froissart manipulates the timeline of Philippa's pregnancy to 'increase the emotional and moral impact of her plea' (p. 45).

¹⁷ This careful negotiation of authority has been discussed in detail by Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, pp. 222–43, 355–78; and Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, pp. 99–111. See also Collette,

The historical expectation for such queenly influence establishes a precedent for viewing women's advice as significant and non-threatening, but it also provides poets with a formula for presenting counsel itself as subordinate to the king's authority.¹⁸ In historical circumstances in which men advise other men, two kinds of authority butt heads — the king's authority as supreme ruler and the authoritative opinions or citations represented in the counsellor's advice.¹⁹ The savvy counsellor and writer of mirrors for princes had to carefully invite his pupil to submit to advice, without appearing to undermine his social superior's authority and intellect (and thereby risking his own position). In the hands of skilled poets such as Chaucer and Gower, the feminized performance that permitted queens to modify their husbands' behaviours becomes a model for fashioning a feminized counselling persona that is inherently deferential (according to social expectations) and therefore can articulate more assertive and authoritative counsel than a masculine one.

Performance and Authority in the Exemplum

On the surface, it is surprising that the figure of the woman counsellor should appear in the texts under consideration here, all of which bear some relation to the mirror for princes genre. Women have long been associated with private life — the world of domesticity and personal relationships — and excluded from the public sphere — the realm in which governance and politics typically reside. Medieval representations of women as the object of courtly love, for example, focus primarily on individual feelings and subjective emotions, rather than on the political

Performing Polity, pp. 99–121. As Parsons, 'The Queen's Intercession in Thirteenth-Century England', p. 147, observes, the patriarchal view that the king represented law and the queen mercy permitted the queen this unofficial role as intercessor.

¹⁸ Maidstone, *Concordia*, ed. by Carlson, ll. 223–32, 431–50 (pp. 62–63, 72–73), indicates the expectation for Anne's intercession. See also Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, pp. 105–19, who shows how Maidstone and Chaucer use queenship to engage wider issues about the relationship between authority and good counsel. As broader studies of medieval queenship have shown, intercession had long been viewed as a royal obligation. See Nelson, 'Medieval Queenship', pp. 179–208; Facingier, 'A Study of Medieval Queenship', pp. 3–48; and Parsons, 'The Queen's Intercession in Thirteenth-Century England', pp. 147–77, and Parsons, 'Mothers, Daughters, Marriage, Power', pp. 63–78.

¹⁹ Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, pp. 44–49, outlines the problematic relationship of king and counsellor. See also Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, p. 237, on the role of emotions and the uncomfortable idea of a man 'working chaunge' in another man's breast.

implications of a love affair or marriage. But this sense of surprise emerges from a strongly gendered association between public and private, male and female, that is a backformation from much later political and social developments that reached their apex in the nineteenth century. The gendering of the public and private spheres — and indeed, the strong separation between the two — was still in formation during the Middle Ages. Certainly, medieval politics were largely the preserve of men, and medieval women were powerfully linked to the domestic and the subjective. But the boundaries between these public and private medieval realms were often blurred; the political could become the domestic — and the domestic, the political — at any given moment. Inevitably, of course, the gendered associations with those realms sometimes became blurry as well. In this light, the connection I describe between the advice to princes genre and the figure of the woman counsellor can be attributed, at least in part, to the way in which advice texts articulated public rule as the consequence of private morality. Indeed, I argue that the genre of mirrors for princes establishes a relationship between public and private that makes the appearance of women counsellors almost inevitable.

A medieval ‘mirror for princes’ (sometimes called a *Fürstenspiegel* or *speculum principis*) exerted pressure on readers to internalize its notions of self-governance, which, for princes, were intrinsically linked to rulership and the proper governance of the realm. These texts thus establish a causal connection between morality and ethics, in which Christian moral virtues (‘moral theology’) undergird the ethical system that guides the individual choices rulers must make (‘ethical politics’). For medieval thinkers, politics might best be described as ‘an extension of ethics into the sphere of public life’, and ‘living politically’ as a process of rigorous and continuous training, practice, and study in moral behaviours.²⁰ Therefore, political counsel means advice on the moral behaviours that a king or aristocratic lord can use wisely to improve his rule and reputation, resolve any conflict at hand, or both. For my purposes, counsel is defined as a public or private act of giving advice in which the adviser is considered authoritative (rather than dismissed as a nagging wife, a fool, or an insignificant subordinate). In particular, I focus on vernacular texts that translate and adapt mirrors for princes because the genre points to the perceived political and social import of the work, making the appearance of a woman counsellor the more exceptional.²¹ Scholars generally accept that

²⁰ See, respectively, Porter, ‘Gower’s Ethical Microcosm and Political Macrocosm’, p. 138, and Briggs, *Giles of Rome’s De Regimine Principum*, p. 151.

²¹ No one book could claim to comprehensively cover all the diverse instances of women’s general counsel such as those found in Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and *Second Nun’s Tale*, Christine de Pizan’s *Cité des Dames*, hagiography, Julian of Norwich’s writings, Margery Kempe’s

non-aristocratic audiences appreciated the Latin genre of mirrors for princes (in textual or oral translation) as conduct manuals that provided models for ideal masculinity.²² But they say little of other closely related vernacular texts that deviate significantly from their authoritative predecessors and provide surprising representations of woman as counsellors. It is my position that these women counsellors are paradoxically integral to the method by which vernacular poets establish their own authority as social critics and political counsellors, as well as the authority for their vernacular texts.

Many of the arguments of this book analyse how the exemplum both enables the assertion of authority and contributes to raising the status of women, so it is helpful to lay out the exemplum's foundational principles and how they affect the representation of women counsellors. Most Latin exempla were relatively brief tales that illustrated a moral. Collections of exempla and mirrors for princes demonstrate what Hans Robert Jauss has called the 'aesthetic of reception', in which the reader is expected to apply the values learned from the text to his lived experiences.²³ Authors of exempla viewed morality as a production and enjoined readers to reproduce the culturally valued behaviours of exemplary protagonists, while avoiding the errors of less virtuous characters. In short, these texts emphasized the need to enact virtues, to perform the morality depicted in their succinct tales. But as Larry Scanlon has convincingly argued, many longer, more detailed vernacular narratives equally operate under 'exemplary logic', the expectation that readers should learn from the protagonist's experiences.²⁴ This view permits lengthy tales such as Gower's *Apollonius of Tyre* or Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* to be read as exempla because their authors emphasize the expectations of the genre.

Boke, the Paston Letters, and late medieval romance, so *Feminized Counsel* focuses specifically on texts closely related to mirrors for princes, where women's counsel seems least expected yet most critical to addressing the 'masculine' topics of politics and ethics.

²² See Fowler, *The Life and Times of John Trevisa*, p. 206, for Giles's suggestion that the treatise should be read 'in the common idiom' for the instruction of a group, and Briggs, *Giles of Rome's De Regimine Principum*, pp. 108–45, for the text's circulation across varying ranks of society.

²³ Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. by Bahti, pp. 19–45. The medieval exemplum's concern with *doing*, with influence on human action as its primary purpose, over simply *knowing* what one should do has been observed by Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower*, pp. 13–17.

²⁴ Traditionally, the exemplum is brief, as noted by Bremond, Le Goff, and Schmitt, *L'Exemplum*, pp. 36–37, but Scanlon's adjustment, in *Narrative, Authority and Power*, pp. 82–87 and, for example, pp. 256–58, addresses the new incorporation of popular narratives into the tradition.

In both of these tales, poetic acts of appropriation and interpretation permit the poet to develop authority by asserting control over an earlier, authoritative text.²⁵ Because the exemplum emerges from the sermon genre, it carries intrinsic moral and literary authority, which is appropriated by vernacular poets to address political topics and crises.²⁶ The vernacular composition, translation, and adaptation of Latin mirrors for princes, in this light, appears as the appropriation of exemplary logic writ large. The exemplum's insistence on *enacting* virtue thus contributes to the notion found in mirrors for princes that ethical kingship is a *performance*: the enactment of individual morality in the public arena of rulership.

But another shift also occurs during the turn to vernacular narratives as authors attempt to accommodate aristocratic preferences for entertaining stories: popular courtly narratives, romances, and classical myths featuring idealized love stories and amorous misbehaviour become the basis for exemplary narratives. Transforming romance or classical lovers' trials into an exemplum, and especially one within a framework of mirrors for princes, brings to the fore any latent political possibilities for the narratives and makes them part of a didactic lesson in ethical politics.²⁷ As Richard Firth Green has shown, late medieval English poets often dressed up advice in pleasing courtly narratives, in part to protect their positions while offering counsel or critique.²⁸ Equally important is the fact that when vernacular authors begin incorporating popular narratives into mirrors for princes and related collections, women become more visible and prominent protagonists. These women play a more substantial role in promoting moral virtues as exemplars themselves and also as influences on aristocratic exemplars.

However, such women do not merely function as characters or mouthpieces, for they also represent gendered models because of the exemplum's stance that protagonists are exemplars for readers and for real human action (rather than abstract ideals). The successful exemplum must offer a plausible representation of reality: if a character appears too distant from what is humanly possible, then the 'mirroring' process by which the reader identifies with the protagonist seems less likely to occur.

²⁵ Glossing, interpretation, and translation all allow a poet to introduce innovations to 'authoritative' sources and accrue authority himself by exercising control over his source; see Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, pp. 122–23; and Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages*, pp. 179–80.

²⁶ Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority and Power*, p. 54.

²⁷ Even if the didactic intent is not as explicit as in the *de regimine* tradition, romance narratives address latent political topics, as Barnes, *Counsel and Strategy in Middle English Romance*, pp. 1–28, argues.

²⁸ Green, *Poets and Princepleasers*, pp. 142–43.

For this reason, authors adjusted classical and older historical exempla to reassure readers that the exemplar confronted the same boundaries of human limitations and social ideologies, even across vast expanses of geographical locations, cultures, and centuries. And through a process called euhemerism or mythography, moralizing authors interpreted mythological deities and demi-gods as merely exceptional humans that pagans mistook for gods; similarly, they rationalized fantastic deeds as poetic exaggerations designed by prior authors to emphasize a character's ideal, human virtues.²⁹ Medieval authors therefore transformed fictional and euhemerized characters into 'real' exemplars, as if they were flesh and blood human beings. The exemplars' posited historical existence is amplified further when they appear in collections alongside recognized historical figures such as Alexander the Great, Constantine, or Julius Caesar. The 'real world' of the exemplum represents not the historical world in which the exemplar lived (if, indeed, he or she ever lived), but instead an idealized version of the contemporary moment, shaped by and subject to social and cultural assumptions shared by authors and audiences.³⁰

The fact that the late medieval vernacular exemplum serves as the fulcrum between the literal 'real world' and allegorical interpretations on the moral or spiritual levels is critical for understanding its representations of gender. The exemplum need not obliterate the literal meaning because its allegorical significance comes from the reinterpretation of the exemplar's activities as illustrating an aspect of Christian morality that, in mirrors for princes, also aligns with ideal political behaviour. This allegoresis or 'imposed' allegory often risks misrepresenting the literal text and weakening the force of the allegory when an author's interpretation seems to either distort or be simply grafted onto the narrative's contents.³¹ But allegoresis more precisely validates the literal level, the part of the narrative that con-

²⁹ See Chance, *Medieval Mythography*, I, pp. 1–7; and Ferguson, *Utter Antiquity*, pp. 13–22.

³⁰ Hampton, *Writing from History*, pp. 8–14, addresses how exempla dissociate events from their original circumstances in order to persuade the author's readers, not reflect historical reality.

³¹ Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery: Some Medieval Books*, pp. 227–333, discusses how allegoresis can enrich both original text and Christian morality, but she also underscores how allegoresis can lead to 'bad allegory', in which the literal narrative and imposed allegory do not cohere well, which degrades the quality of the allegory. See also the defence of allegoresis by Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages*, pp. 63–65; and Akbari, *Seeing Through the Veil*, pp. 12–14. When Akbari notes that in allegoresis, 'personifications lose their fixed identity as embodied abstractions and behave in ways that suggest they are less personifications than personae, fictional characters with motivations and emotions' (p. 14), this is really an acknowledgement that the kind of imposed allegory used in exempla can counteract personification and assert the separate importance of the literal narrative.

structs the reader's world and indicates that readers must apply the text's morality to their actions in the world.³² As Elizabeth Allen writes, the exemplum is 'at once universal and particular, exceptional and typical, transhistorical and circumstantial' — these seemingly antithetical qualities coexist in fruitful tensions.³³ Any disjunctions between narrative and allegorical interpretation prompt readers to contemplate the virtue in question on multiple levels and arrive at a stronger sense of how morality is defined and practised.³⁴ Since the literal and allegorical meanings exist simultaneously, literal aspects like gender become significant, rather than concepts to be supplanted by a higher, allegorical value (as they are in personifications).

Therefore, the theoretical underpinnings of the exemplum enable authors to present women as exemplars — female human models, not feminine abstractions — because the exemplum analyses and allegorizes concrete moments of human history. Of course, women characters become models for women readers, since vernacular works attained a wider audience than their Latinate predecessors,³⁵ but more unexpectedly they become feminized models of virtue for male readers as well, transforming mirrors for princes from an exclusively masculine genre to one that brings a gender-balanced perspective to cultural ideals. Like the virtues so clearly deemed valuable, in these vernacular narrative exempla, gender becomes part of the performance advocated and, therefore, relevant to discourses of politics, counsel, and authority.

Feminizing Poetic Counsel

As this project will demonstrate, by evoking the queenly intercessor and women's assumed powerless position in late medieval society, the woman counsellor figure

³² Kelly, *Medieval Imagination*, pp. 178–203, shows that there was a growing late medieval movement that stressed the literal aspect of courtly narratives and concrete examples over abstractions in order to address the 'realities' of love and disappointment. These political exempla share similar proclivities. Hagiographical practices also emphasized, as Sanok, *Her Life Historical*, pp. 14–20, has shown, that the 'ability to imitate the saint in an immediate, rather than figural, mode' was crucial to the modelling process (p. 14).

³³ Allen, *False Fables and Exemplary Truth*, p. 3.

³⁴ Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority and Power*, pp. 34–35; and Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower*, pp. 36–60.

³⁵ On women audiences and their reception, see Collette, 'Heeding the Counsel of Prudence', pp. 419–29; McDonald, 'Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, Ladies at Court and the Female Reader', pp. 28–39; and Meale, "'...alle the bokes that I have of latyn, englishe and frensch", pp. 128–58.

enabled poets such as Chaucer and Gower to defer authority to the king while delivering much-needed counsel. The historical presence of queenly intercessors and repeated crises of kingship created a fertile if uncertain ground in which poets sought safe strategies for advising aristocrats and addressing contemporary instabilities. And, of course, at stake in mirrors for princes is not the public authority that was traditionally denied to women but rather a moral authority to counsel, which queenly intercessions and even clerical edicts show was perceived as possible for women to access.³⁶ For poets who specifically wished to engage matters of kingship and politics, women counsellors provided a protective shield should their texts lead to misinterpretation or cause offense — much like Green's more general screens in which poets concealed useful advice in entertaining narratives.

Crucially, women counsellors enable poets to access authority because they do *not* exercise a passive form of influence that relies primarily on invocations of the marital bond or Marian intercession. Ricardian poets exploit the idea of intercession to develop women literary counsellors, who use petitionary language to pave the way for more forceful modes of advising.³⁷ And the women under consideration are not all wives, nor do the wives represented gain leverage because of their spousal position alone. Rather, they gain authority because they echo or deliberately cite *de regimine* counsel, which classifies them as *political* counsellors and indicates a new, emerging literary role for women characters. Significantly, the woman counsellor never becomes the nagging shrew or wicked wife of the antifeminist literary tradition. Of course, the writers in question — Chaucer, Gower, Christine, and her translators — were aware of these amusing and discredited figures. Yet they depict the woman counsellor as a resolute interlocutor who challenges assumptions about women's roles without falling back on traditional representations of woman as courtly ideals or badgering hags. The authority accessed by women counsellors is the serious, intellectual authority of a knowledgeable speaker to act as an adviser.

In the works under consideration, the poet becomes very much like the fictional women advisers, for both are subordinate to the princes they seek to counsel toward beneficial social and political virtues. The women's attempts are often initially met with derision or scepticism, and it becomes apparent that cultural assumptions and the literal attribute of gender paradoxically both constrain and enable the woman counsellor. For instance, Melibee objects to hearing Prudence's

³⁶ See Farmer, 'Persuasive Voices: Clerical Images of Medieval Wives', for clerical recommendations that wives should urge their husbands to exercise moral virtues.

³⁷ Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, pp. 111–19, makes this claim for Chaucer's Alceste, but as my project shows, the practice was more widespread.

advice because ‘alle wommen been wikke’, and he fears that others would think that he had given her ‘maistrie’ over him (*Melibee*, ll. 1057–58). The *Bibell*-poet adds a reminder not in his source in which Othea tells Hector that, ‘he schold not disdeygne her wrytyng though sche, a woman, sent hyt to hym’, because her counsel itself is valid (p. 145, ll. 15–16). The woman counsellor can speak because she does not threaten her pupil’s authority, but men’s scepticism requires a defence of her competence and a defence of counsel itself, which, by implication, asserts evidence for the undeniable import of the poet’s own counselling text. Once we accept that, by definition, the exemplum expects readers to embrace its models, new perspectives on counsel become apparent in women counsellors’ activities. Women counsellors become enabling models for poets, and defending their legitimacy as advisers generates authority for poets who likewise lack access to traditional, recognized forms of intellectual or literary authority.

Speaking through a woman counsellor becomes an innovative *topos* for the male poet that allows him to address sensitive political topics safely. The most commonly recognized *topos* that indicates a poet’s subordination to aristocratic readers and literary authorities is the modesty *topos*. Conventional examples deny the author’s abilities to compose skilfully in the vernacular or tackle weighty topics by gesturing to his ‘lak of suffisaunce’ in rhetoric, his inability to find proper words in English, and his ‘dull’ or barren wits.³⁸ While this *topos* is readily acknowledged as only partially serious, it demands that the poet relinquish claims to poetic and intellectual authority — the author casts the esteemed patron or incomparable Latin text as superior and himself as submissive and humble in comparison. The feminized counsellor constitutes an inventive, unconventional modesty *topos* that instead focuses on how ethical, intellectual, and political contributions can come from unexpected sources, a truism repeated often in mirrors for princes. Judith Ferster uses this commonplace as a springboard to analyse class differences, but, as I argue, gender is critical, too, because womanhood is an obvious distinguishing characteristic and, as in the *Melibee*, often an instantaneous impediment to authority.³⁹ Rather than require the poet’s stated abnegation of personal, intellectual authority, the *topos* of the woman counsellor plays on social expectations that women lack authority. By illustrating that women can not only advise well but also provide indispensable counsel and viewpoints that male counsellors neglect, poets implicitly stake the claim that their vernacular

³⁸ See Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. by Trask, pp. 83–85; and Lawton, ‘Dullness and the Fifteenth Century’, pp. 761–94.

³⁹ Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, p. 47.

works and their poetic voices should carry equal weight to those prior authorities to which they are supposedly inferior and subordinate.

All the works in this study involve the translation and adaptation of texts from Latin or French into the author's vernacular. Rita Copeland has called such productions 'secondary translations' that draw authority from classical texts while asserting the author's independence from yet equal status to his predecessors.⁴⁰ Scholars of vernacular theology have long seen the feminine, 'mother tongue' challenging the Latinate father tongue, and this opposition is equally important to mirrors for princes as vernacular 'political theology'.⁴¹ Women counsellors played an integral role in this process for the vernacular writers under consideration, who use them to ventriloquize assertive advice and to exemplify counsellors who combine deference to 'superiors' with intellectual authority of their own design.

The woman counselor has not been recognized as a spokesperson for the male poet (just as she is for Christine de Pizan) in large part because of the gender binary. This binary suggests that, in the medieval context, for a man to adopt feminine qualities or identify with women would signify his emasculation, inferiority, or wickedness. Yet, despite the prevalence of antifeminist literature throughout the Middle Ages, scholars have found that medieval writers approached gender far more flexibly than has been previously assumed. Jill Mann offers the compelling demonstration that Chaucer associates women with such virtues as mercy, pity, and patience, and that Chaucer's best husbands and rulers reject masculine dominance and aggression to embrace these 'feminine' virtues instead.⁴² Susan Crane, Simon Gaunt, and Dorsey Armstrong evaluate the flexibility and instability of gender in medieval romance to show that by problematizing gender assumptions, authors explore and reveal cultural ideals.⁴³ More recently, Tara Williams has shown that Gower's *Confessio Amantis* often stresses the performance of gender through clothing, behaviour, and language, not only to construct gender but also to illustrate that a womanly persona can be but one component of other identi-

⁴⁰ Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages*, pp. 179–220; see also *The Idea of the Vernacular*, ed. by Wogan-Browne and others, pp. 316–21.

⁴¹ For a summary of scholarship on vernacular theology, see Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, pp. 295–97. Genet, 'Ecclesiastics and Political Theory in Late Medieval England', pp. 26–27, uses 'political theology' to describe discourses analogous to medieval political theory.

⁴² Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, especially pp. 70–99, 129–44. For the opposite view that feminization is detrimental to masculine and poetic authority, see Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, pp. 1–10, 22–23, 239–44, 265–66.

⁴³ Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, especially pp. 12–15; Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature*; and Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community*.

ties and an essential part of ideal masculinity.⁴⁴ In my assessment, what facilitates Gower's exploration (and other poets', too) is the exemplum's built-in emphasis on performance: gender becomes less an internal, essential characteristic and more the product of certain behaviours. It thereby becomes plausible to conceive of 'masculine' or 'feminine' behaviours as flexible, pragmatic, performative, and dependent on circumstances, not static designations that mark permanent access to or exclusion from authority. Crucially, in such exempla, the adoption of a feminized persona does not indicate emasculation but instead frequently is shown to be advantageous and prudent.

What my project ultimately demonstrates is that, far from using women's voices as an 'opposite' against which to define masculine aristocratic authority, late medieval poets concerned with ethical kingship embraced the feminine as a representation of their own subordination to kings, patrons, and authorities: they developed authority by identifying with their women counsellors.⁴⁵ *Feminized Counsel* reveals that the authority to write and counsel was not constructed as an inherent quality available only to male advisers, male poets, or Latin writers, but, instead, a status earned through the demonstration of wisdom and of virtues that are accessible to both men and women.

* * *

The incorporation of mirrors for princes counsel into widespread vernacular literature reflects a 'search for new symbols of security'.⁴⁶ Heiko A. Oberman uses this phrase to describe religious reformation movements: in periods of religious crisis, reformers search for symbols and ideas that seem to offer some stability in the face of an unstable world.⁴⁷ Texts offering advice to princes in late medieval England constitute a similar search as authors wrestle with ideologies of kingship, morality, and politics. In these works, counsel becomes a vital symbol of security because it underscores moral and social virtues that theoretically allow men — whether kings or not — to stabilize their worldly positions. Such con-

⁴⁴ Williams, *The Invention of Womanhood*, pp. 51–85, especially pp. 84–85.

⁴⁵ The acceptance of a feminized role resembles the rhetorical moves by Peter Abelard, who, making virtue of necessity, used his castration to regain and enhance his authority. Yet he relies on men such as Origen and Jerome, not women, as models for repressed physical masculinity, and he defines himself against Heloise to bolster his claims to masculinity; his 'feminization' as an authorizing model subtly excludes actual women. On Abelard and gender, see Wheeler, 'Origenary Fantasies', pp. 107–24; and Irvine, 'Abelard and (Re)writing the Male Body', pp. 87–102.

⁴⁶ Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation*, p. 25.

⁴⁷ Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation*, p. 25.

duct manuals are predicated on the notion that the acquisition of virtues will be efficacious in the reader's life. In particular, Gower observes, 'That we fortune clepe so | Out of the man himself it groweth' (*Confessio*, Prol., 548–49), implying that man's exercise of morality can forestall Fortune and control his future. Although even the best of princes must fall, late medieval writers imagined the possibility of an escape from Fortune's blows through the practice of virtues, and this idea took on greater urgency in the fifteenth century when there were rival claimants to the throne and significant divisions in the realm.⁴⁸ Creating a fantasy of combatting or controlling Fortune drives home the importance of adopting the traits heralded as ideal, not simply to be a good ruler but also to stabilize one's position and the state as a whole. Thus, the works in this study also offer the opportunity to analyse the role that exemplary women play in the creation of discourses designed to render less effective that most pervasive and perverse feminine abstraction Fortune.

Over the course of this book, I trace two threads in vernacular descendants of mirrors for princes: how authors develop authority for fictional women as specifically political counsellors and how that process reflects on the author's own project of advice-giving and self-authorization. I begin with the Ricardian works of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and *Melibee*, which are influenced by queenly intercessions yet imagine a more authoritative and political role for women. In Gower's exempla that feature a woman counselling an aristocratic male against pride, I locate an unacknowledged pre-history of the marriage metaphor of the state in which balanced marital relationships illustrate how ideal counsel should function. I propose that Gower identifies with the women counsellors of Book I in order to invite the reader to suppress pride and appreciate the *Confessio's* advice. Chaucer's similar identification with women counsellors becomes evident in the *Legend of Good Women*, for, as I show in Chapter two, the *Prologue* illustrates the process by which his fictionalized narrator learns from Alceste to adopt a feminized persona. She models a seeming submission to Cupid's ruling power that enables her authoritative insistence on the proper ways Cupid should exercise that power. I argue that by following her example and submitting to his penance to write of good women and false men, Chaucer depicts his narrator using the legends to reassert his poetic authority and develop his own voice as a social critic, through exempla that focus less on gender and more on characters' political decisions and responsibilities.

⁴⁸ See Nolan, *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture*, pp. 147–52; and Strohm, *Politique: Languages of Statecraft Between Chaucer and Shakespeare*, pp. 1–5.

The *Legend's Prologue* exemplifies the shifting power dynamics that occur during counsel and advocates a feminized counselling persona, and, as I demonstrate in Chapter three, Chaucer's *Melibee* provides another meditation on how authority and power are contingent upon circumstances. The *Melibee* addresses the crucial lesson of exempla that universal truths mean little unless applied to specific contexts — a message that Chaucer delivers first in Prudence's defence of her ability to counsel despite antifeminist beliefs about women's inferiority. The narrative stages the development of Prudence's authority from domestic helpmate to political proxy. Moreover, because her persuasion is based more in her rhetoric than her marital role, the *Melibee* becomes a political manual that models how someone without recognized authority — including male counsellors — can strategically generate the authority to counsel. By analysing a fifteenth-century manuscript witness in San Marino, Huntington Library, MS HM 144 (c. 1480–1500), I then establish that Chaucer's near contemporaries could have read the *Melibee* as a political manual; this witness brings Chaucer's works into the context of late medieval *de casibus* narratives, like Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*, and ultimately presents Prudence's advice as the essential means by which a reader can stall Fortune's wheel.

The final chapter takes up two independent translations of the *Epistre Othea* into chivalric conduct manuals in the mid-fifteenth century. This exploration reveals that male poets deploy women counsellors in much the same way that Christine does to establish an authorizing persona. Christine's *Othea* teaches her reader to understand allegoresis and to apply her exempla to his or her own life. In the process, she also reinterprets antifeminist narratives to argue that even if some women are not ideal, other individuals must be accepted in authoritative, intellectual roles. By studying her translators, I evaluate the most literal appropriations of the female voice: men's translations of the *Othea*. While other scholars have proposed that Scrope's translation primarily reflects antifeminist tendencies, I assert another possibility: Christine and *Othea* become exemplars that authorize both of these translators' own forays into advice-giving. As the first substantial treatment of the *Bibell* in over fifty years, this chapter also recuperates the work — often seen as a flawed translation — as a skilful adaptation of Christine's work to English contexts. At its core, this chapter demonstrates the complicated process by which each male translator differently identifies with Christine's women counsellors to provide a conduct manual not only for aristocrats but also a wide readership that included women and non-aristocratic readers.

All of these works exploit the exemplum, the genre in which performance matters, to promote the notion that morality, gender, and authority are all constructed performances. In this way, 'feminized counsel' becomes part of larger discourses about the access that women and lay authors have to cultural and poetic authority.

Broadly speaking, for late medieval poets concerned with ethical leadership and questions of mercy, counsel, and authority, women are 'good to think with'. The formulation derives from Claude Lévi-Strauss's conclusion that people choose certain animals or plants as representative totems because they are useful in thinking through social and cultural situations and oppositions.⁴⁹ Through women counsellors, vernacular texts derived from mirrors for princes literature explore the power dynamics of counsel, marital relationships, and social and gendered hierarchies. By asserting a woman's capacity in a role historically not permitted her, the author also effectively demonstrated his own ability to provide counsel.

Therefore, by validating women counsellors, vernacular poets developed their own authority and asserted their ability to engage important socio-political topics. In these cases, poets resolve masculine anxieties about authority by identifying with women's positions, not by defining masculine and feminine against each other. Women and feminized men are not always inferior to authoritative men, the association with women is not always negative, and sometimes, women counsellors are more effective than men. Even if poets deployed the woman counselor as a strategy to demonstrate humility or protect themselves as they expressed political commentary, such authoritative female counsellors elevated the status of women in the process (whether the poet did so intentionally, like Christine de Pizan, or not). Because of their widespread popularity, these works could transform popular opinion about women's roles and challenge antifeminist stereotypes with the counter-model of rational, morally virtuous, and authoritative women counsellors.

⁴⁹ Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism*, pp. 89–91.

WOMEN, COUNSEL, AND MARRIAGE METAPHORS IN JOHN GOWER'S *CONFESSIO AMANTIS*

Despite its amorous title, the *Confessio Amantis* stands out prominently as a vernacular mirror for princes that presents a remarkable sensitivity to women. Gower directly draws on the genre's most widespread texts, the *De regimine principum* and *Secretum secretorum*. In Book 7, he purports to summarize Aristotle's advice to Alexander, and his framework contextualizes the *Confessio* as a mirror for princes: the Prologue identifies contemporary social ills that need remedying, and he dedicates copies to both Richard II and Henry IV. What makes Gower's mirror for princes unique, however, is its interest in women and their contributions both to political culture and to the individual cultivation of virtue. The *Confessio* typically represents women as assets to the development of a virtuous self and a virtuous state; unlike many of his contemporaries, Gower does not rely on negative stereotypes about women to make his exemplars convincing. This idea that women are valuable members of medieval society — both as traditional wives and mothers and as counsellors — is established at the very beginning of the *Confessio*, in the two lengthy stories of Book I, *The Tale of Florent* and *The Tale of Three Questions*. In these stories, Gower establishes women as efficacious counsellors and creates a marriage metaphor for the ideal counsellor-king relationship. Crucially, he demonstrates that the feminized persona adopted by the women in his exempla has significant advantages as a subject position from which to advise kings and nobles: because women are not recognized as genuine political subjects (who might seek to usurp or challenge a ruler), they are able to speak the truth without antagonizing the powerful men who control their world. As I will show, Gower links advice to princes with women's counsel in order to imagine a gendered structure of authority and advice in which men and women work in tandem to create a harmonious whole.

Gower's depiction of a woman as an authoritative counsellor reverses the expectations for a work modelled after Latin mirrors for princes, the genre designed to teach ethical and broadly political virtues. Since these texts addressed a male, aristocratic audience and reinforced that audience's indisputable authority over the world, they often denied women any active role in masculine political affairs. Because the counsellor-pupil relationship could be fraught with power struggles, such texts usually praised the recipient in order to avoid offending him and to protect the author's life or livelihood. Instead of explicitly correcting any perceived specific faults or implying his deficiency, they cautiously advised him to practise a multitude of general moral virtues that would enhance his reputation and rule.¹ Within this overtly masculine and politically-charged genre, women characters were frequently marginalized as inferior persons to be controlled, or absent except as threats to the king's physical and spiritual well-being, even in English translations. For example, among the nine English versions of the *Secretum secretorum*, the most extensive representation of a woman features one raised by serpents who attempts to seduce and kill Alexander. Aristotle thwarts her efforts, and he advises Alexander to 'at no tyme trust the werkes and services of women.'² Giles of Rome's *De regimine principum* also tends to repeat antifeminist refrains. For Giles, women are 'children of inparfit age', they require men to control them or judge their virtues (or vices), they are naturally 'unstedefast and unstable', and they are far more inclined to the passions and evil than men.³ Specifically, Giles argues that a wife's counsel should not sway the husband, for 'wymmen mote faille of þe use of resoun and have feble counsaill'; he offers one so-called exception, a backhanded compliment: if one needs counsel 'in som hasty nede wiþoute longe tyme of avise-ment', then women's counsel is delivered more quickly (pp. 206–07). As Stephen

¹ Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, pp. 39–54. See also Rigby, 'Aristotle for Aristocrats and Poets', pp. 273–81, on Giles's argument that monarchy was a fundamental necessity, and that the prince, therefore, was obliged to act in his people's best interests.

This chapter is adapted from my article: "'Thing which a man mai noght areche': Women and Counsel in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*", *The Chaucer Review*, 42 (2007), 91–109. © Copyright Mistry Schieberle (2007), and used with permission of The Pennsylvania State University Press.

² *Secretum Secretorum*, ed. by Manzalaoui, p. 46. See also John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, ed. and trans. by Nederman, pp. 207–09, for women as negative exemplars of frivolity, wickedness, and weakness; even his representation of Judith aims to shame Holofernes, not praise a woman's agency.

³ Trevisa, *The Governance of Kings and Princes*, ed. by Fowler, Briggs, and Remley, pp. 18, 149–50, 156–57, 194–208, 245. On Giles's portrayal of women, see also Rigby, 'Aristotle for Aristocrats and Poets', pp. 291–98; and Blythe, *Ideal Government and the Mixed Constitution*, pp. 64–67.

H. Rigby explains, Giles draws on the Aristotelian notion that 'just as women's bodies arrive at their mature form sooner than men's [...] so women's counsel is sooner arrived at than men's'.⁴ Giles then undercuts the validity of women's counsel with the proverb that 'an evel herbe groweþ swythe sone, for kynde [nature] reccheþ luyte [little] þerof and bryngeþ it sone to fol [foolish or wicked] wexinge' (p. 207). Men's counsel, therefore, is obviously 'more parfit' (p. 207). Giles initially may seem to entertain the possibility of heeding women's counsel, but his presentation turns into repeated deterrents from taking their imperfect advice. His supposed exception proves the rule that women's inferior counsel should not actually factor into the husband's decisions. In the Latin mirror traditions that heavily impacted Middle English writers, then, women are, at best, justifiably inferior to men, and they are not represented as capable counsellors.

Despite these antifeminist views, Giles offers one tantalizing opportunity for perceiving women's roles differently when he draws parallels between the realm and the household. His intentions are to justify the central, hierarchical power of the monarch and promote a regal government informed by counsel from close friends and allies, but he uses analogous household relationships to illustrate his ideals.⁵ He compares the father's rule over his children to his preferred form of government, 'real lordschipe' (*regimine regali*), and he likens the contractual relationship between husband and wife to 'politik rewelyng' (*regimine politico*), in which the king is subject to laws made by citizens.⁶ However, the contract refers only to the negotiations of the marriage contract, not to a shared process of lawmaking between husband and wife during the marriage, and Giles applies to the spousal relationship a form of government that he considered inferior to the supposedly more natural 'real lordschipe'.⁷ Although Giles stresses the limitations of the wife's role and expresses grave doubts about women's virtues, he also acknowledges that 'it is not impossible' for an exceptional woman to reject feminine weaknesses and 'by the use of resoun, be stedefast and constant and overcome suche inclinacioun [to

⁴ Rigby, 'Aristotle for Aristocrats and Poets', p. 294.

⁵ See Blythe, *Ideal Government and the Mixed Constitution*, pp. 60–76; and Rigby, 'Aristotle for Aristocrats and Poets', pp. 259–313.

⁶ Trevisa, *The Governance of Kings and Princes*, ed. by Fowler, Briggs, and Remley, p. 191; Giles of Rome, *De regimine principum*, II.1.14.

⁷ Blythe, *Ideal Government and the Mixed Constitution*, pp. 65–67, cautions, 'It should be emphasized that Giles does not envision an ongoing process of lawmaking by husband and wife together, but rather a set of laws established once and for all at the time of marriage' (p. 65). See also Collette, *Performing Polity*, pp. 174–76.

vice]’ (p. 208).⁸ On the whole, Giles remains suspicious of women’s influence, but his examples apply political systems to the household and leave open the possibility of inverting that equation. He thus offers poets like Gower a starting place for using the spousal relationship to address political topics such as kingship and counsel.

Against this backdrop, Gower strikingly depicts a woman in both *Florent* and *Three Questions* as the *only* individual who can instruct a powerful male. This positive engagement with the feminine enables Gower to imagine counsel and political discourses as both ‘feminine’ and authoritative. Indeed, the advice given by these women fits the model of political counsel commonly given by men in mirrors for princes: they impart moral lessons that improve an aristocratic leader’s self-governance and his governance of his realm.⁹ But more than reversing expectations for women’s authority, the *Confessio* in fact constitutes an unacknowledged pre-history of marriage as a metaphor for the state in English writings, and it more thoroughly explores the useful parallels between household and polity established in Giles’s *De regimine*.¹⁰ Gower’s deployment of the marriage metaphor specifically argues that counsel between husband and wife, king and polity, is essential. In *The Tale of Florent* and *The Tale of Three Questions*, he depicts the marital relationship as a model for the ideal polity, in which husband (ruler) and wife (counsellor and polity more broadly) share a mutually beneficial relationship.

Because the *Confessio* is at heart a book of advice, exploring Gower’s representations of advisers can tease out the complicated relationship of tales to each other and to Gower’s ideals of kingship and counsel. At least thirty-seven tales contain explicit references to formal councils, counsel, or consultation.¹¹ Many depict

⁸ See also Trevisa, *The Governance of Kings and Princes*, ed. by Fowler, Briggs, and Remley, pp. 197–207, 245–49; and Rigby, ‘Aristotle for Aristocrats and Poets’, pp. 291–98, on Giles’s treatment of women, which admits the possibility of goodness while emphasizing their natural potential for wickedness.

⁹ See Porter, ‘Gower’s Ethical Microcosm and Political Macrocosm’, pp. 135–38.

¹⁰ Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*, pp. 207–23, identifies the metaphor as appearing first in a commentary by Lucas de Penna (1320–c. 1390), but he cites no English medieval examples. See also Blythe, *Ideal Government and the Mixed Constitution*, pp. 64–66; and Rigby, ‘Aristotle for Aristocrats and Poets’, pp. 293–94. Giles seems more interested in applying political terms to the household relationships rather than vice versa.

¹¹ Numbers in parentheses indicate multiple councils or consultations. Book I: *Mundus and Paulina*; *Florent* (5); *The Trump of Death*; *Nebuchadnezzar*; *Three Questions* (3). Book II: *Constance*; *False Bachelor*; *Constantine and Sylvester* (3). Book III: *Jupiter, Juno, and Tiresias*; *Athemias and Demophon*; *Orestes*. Book IV: *Phaeton*; *Icarus*; *Rosiphelee*; *Nauplius and Ulysses*. Book V: *Midas*; *The Steward’s Wife* (2); *Achilles*; *Jason and Medea*; *Theseus and Ariadne*; *Paris and Helen*. Book VI: *Nectanabus*; *Dives and Lazarus*. Book VII: *King, Wine, Woman, Truth*;

counsel more broadly, although they are less explicit — for instance, Telaphus convinces Achilles to have mercy (*Telaphus and Teucer*, Book III), Penelope writes to Ulysses to persuade him to return home (*Penelope and Ulysses*, Book IV), and Raphael teaches Tobias how to be honest in love (*Tobias and Sara*, Book VII). Of course, many medieval texts actively create discourses of counsel. What makes the *Confessio* unique is that Gower links political counsel to overwhelmingly positive representations of women. While he offers examples of both men and women characters as advisers, his male counsellors advise their superiors less successfully. When Nauplius effectively reproaches Ulysses, he does so as a friend and equal; they are both kings and allies, so the context does not manifest the threat that might exist were the power dynamics imbalanced (iv.1815–95).¹² But the *Folly of Rehoboam* demonstrates the failure of men's counsel: Rehoboam ignores his old, wise counsellors and instead follows the unripe advice of young men; no one challenges his authority or corrects his mistakes (vii.4027–4146). Men designated as counsellors simply give advice, and whether a superior acts upon it or not determines the outcome and the moral lesson. By contrast, in tales with prominent women counsellors such as *Florent* and *Three Questions*, the successful conclusion to the narrative hinges upon the woman's counsel and, in *Three Questions*, on her ability to correct her king without threatening his authority as ruler. Gower's women counsel boldly, whereas male counsellors, even when they are older, sage, and right (as in *Rehoboam*) rarely demand to be heard or correct the king. Only the *Courtiers and the Fool* offers an exception: male courtiers give their king poor counsel, but the Fool obliquely admonishes him in a surprising contrast (vii.3945–4026). This exception proves the rule: as women generally do, the Fool lacks the expectation of authority or threat that allows him to open the king's eyes. Yet Gower more often uses women to represent the disenfranchised voice of morally and politically responsible counsel not provided by traditional male counsellors.

Of course, Gower's valuable women counsellors might be explained by the courtly quality of 'the lover's confession'. Representing marriage as the ideal state for a lover necessarily requires a favourable image of women.¹³ However, when Gower points out that certain women are the *only* persons who could provide crucial counsel to aristocratic men, he goes beyond depicting attractive wives. His

Julius and the Poor Knight; Abab and Micaiah; Carmidotirus; Lycurgus and His Laws; Codrus; Spertachus and Thamaris; The Courtiers and The Fool; The Folly of Rehoboam (2); *The Counsel of Balaam; Tarquin and Arons; The Rape of Lucrece; Virginia*. Book VIII: *Apollonius*.

¹² All citations derive from Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. by Peck.

¹³ See Burke, 'Women in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*', pp. 250–52.

work is distinct from other vernacular literature in which wives advise husbands (such as Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* or *Melibee*), because Gower's women do not start out as wives. Rather, they are counsellors first and foremost, and the women of *Florent* and *Three Questions* intervene efficaciously in *political* impasses. Marriage becomes the reward for the counsellor that both reasserts social hierarchies by confirming the king's superior position and establishes a continued relationship between counsellor and pupil. In this specific context, the resulting marriage metaphor becomes the more intriguing because Gower values femininity itself, not solely wifehood, as the defining characteristic of an effective adviser.

Although counsellors and counsel appear elsewhere in the poem, it is in Book I on pride that Gower defines and theorizes the role of adviser and the nature of advice-giving. He foregrounds women as especially useful in countering pride and convincing men to accept counsel that leads to virtuous behaviour. Among the nine tales against sins of pride, five — *Mundus and Paulina*, *Florent*, *The Trump of Death*, *Nebuchadnezzar's Vainglorious Punishment*, and *Three Questions* — contain ten occasions of councils, counselling, or consultation. The fact that the majority of these events happen in *Florent* (five) and *Three Questions* (two), which both prominently feature women as advisers to powerful men, reveals that Gower's understanding of advice-giving is fundamentally linked to a specifically feminized discourse of counsel. Women characters become a screen through which Gower addresses challenging political topics and reconfigures the lord-counsellor relationship as a balanced marriage. This formulation removes jockeying for authority from the counselling equation and enables reform of a powerful man without threatening his status. Thus, through his women counsellors, Gower recommends a 'feminized' and seemingly submissive role for counsellors, who were historically men, not women. The marriage metaphor thereby reframes the counsellor-advisee relationship early in the *Confessio* by demonstrating how to circumvent a man's pride; it asserts that to benefit the common good, counsel, like marriage, requires negotiation among parties and the understanding that their fates are intertwined.

These innovative roles for women counsellors demonstrate Gower's use of societal assumptions about gender and power to imagine how a balanced marriage serves as a model for an ideal political relationship. The marriage model assumes that the husband naturally, socially, and legally maintained public authority over his wife, who became a *femme couverte*, a woman covered by a male authority figure; historical women could influence men's decisions but not exercise the independent authority to enforce their views.¹⁴ Gower's model finds precedent

¹⁴ Bennett, 'Widows in the Medieval Countryside', pp. 69–114. See also Fowler, *Literary Character*, pp. 106–11; and Leyser, *Medieval Women*, pp. 169–70.

in the actions of contemporary queens who influenced husbands through petitionary intercession but did not exercise independent authority.¹⁵ Yet his counsellors exhibit a broader concept of authority: the ability to evoke moral or ethical traditions so that one's speech, designed to influence but not dominate the listener, carries weight and must be taken seriously. This kind of speech constitutes *authoritative counsel*, and Gower's women represent the necessary subordination of counsellor to king that paradoxically enables authoritative counsel. *Florent* and *Three Questions* instruct would-be counsellors to adopt humble personas, and the tales simultaneously encourage recipients of advice to view it as essential, recommended, and non-threatening. In an era of strict censorship, treason statutes, execution of the king's counsellors, and struggles between Richard and the Lords Appellant over the roles of both king and council, Gower's model upholds the primacy of counsel in a way that protects poet and counsellor, and benefits the king.¹⁶

Through these two tales, Gower implicitly argues that the best advice is non-threatening and mutually beneficial to all involved. This argument rests upon a notion of gendered performance that is detached from biological sex; although the counsellors in Book I are female, they model a feminized discourse that can be taken up — indeed, should be taken up — by any adviser, woman or man. This sophisticated concept of counsel as a gendered performance becomes in Gower's hands an exemplary discursive mode for advising powerful men while also adhering to the truth. His insistence on articulating this discursive mode at the start of the *Confessio* makes it clear that the notion of truthful counsel lies at the very heart of the work as a whole. After all, Book I's exempla implicitly address

¹⁵ Gower draws on the same models that Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, pp. 99–115, argues influenced Chaucer significantly.

¹⁶ For more detail on the Good Parliament, struggles during Richard's minority, and the executions of various advisers to the king, see Saul, *Richard II*, pp. 108–34, 148–204, 235–69. On legislations against speech, such as the reaffirmation of the *scandalum mandatum* in 1379 (which rendered treasonous any speech critical of peers), a 1386 statute prohibiting anyone from issuing counsel to the king under penalty of forfeiting all goods or death for a second offence, and the royal proclamation that no one was to speak ill of the advisers attacked by the Appellants, see *The Westminster Chronicle*, ed. and trans. by Hector and Harvey, pp. 214–17, 167–75. Additionally, the Proclamation of 1387 indicates that such restrictions applied to both written and spoken speech: it orders that 'non be so hardy to speke, ne moven, ne publishe, en prive ne appert, onithyng that mighte soune in evel or dishoneste of oure lige Lord the Kyng, ne of oure Ladi the Quene or ony lordes that have bien duellyng with the Kyng bi for this time, or of hem that duellen aboute his persone now, or shul duelle' (*Memorials of London*, ed. and trans. by Riley, p. 500). See Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, pp. 31–35; and Grudin, *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse*, pp. 20–25.

Gower's readers, urging them to eschew their own pride and accept the lessons of the *Confessio* with humility and the desire to achieve the common profit.

Ethics, Counsel, and Reading

Before approaching Gower's women counsellors, it will be helpful to develop a sense of how he depicts counsel more broadly. The Prologue establishes that personal virtues and morality firmly intertwine with the state of the realm; individual and personal conduct *is* political, in the broadest sense of the term, and the ruler's 'personal kingship' influences the political well-being of the realm.¹⁷ Russell Peck outlines more precisely what Gower's ideal kingship entails: it should provide for the common good, which the ruler achieves by tempering his personal will with intellect, memory, and love so that he can make decisions in the interest of the common profit.¹⁸ In short, Gower's discourses locate political ethics within a system of deliberation and moral choices. By encouraging the individual moral reform of the ruler, Gower provides a remedy for the inter-related problems of division, self-interested ambition, and forgetfulness within both an individual and his society. He addresses the ruler's obligations to accept and apply advice wisely for the common good in Book I by using women counsellors to urge fictional aristocrats to remember and embrace good counsel. The Prologue sets the stage for a political text in the mirrors for princes mode, and by Book I, the 'lover's confession' appears to take priority, but Gower does not necessarily switch gears. Rather, he promotes the searching assessment of narratives to weigh the validity of the given moral to each tale — making room for political lessons to be drawn from 'amorous' exempla. He uses the exchanges between the priestly authority figure Genius and his pupil Amans to construct the relationship between reading and advice, narrative and counsel, and these lessons reveal how Gower expects his readers to exercise hermeneutic strategies that impact the reception of his exempla and his women counsellors.

For Gower, the analysis of stories, not simply the reading of them, transmits counsel about kingship. Counsel and reading exist in a mutually supportive relationship that has its basis in Middle English words for counsel. The three main words are forms of *conseil* (OFr *consoil*), *avys* (OFr *avis*), and *rede* (OE *red*). Forms of *conseil* appear one hundred and sixty-five times in the *Confessio*, while forms of *avys* and *rede* that refer to acts of advice or counsel appear seventy-six

¹⁷ Porter, 'Gower's Ethical Microcosm and Political Macrocosm', pp. 138–39.

¹⁸ Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, pp. xxiii, 10–13.

times and sixty-eight times, respectively. The following chart traces these words' primary meanings given in the *Middle English Dictionary*, followed by additional definitions relevant to Gower. For example, forms of 'avis' have primary meanings related to visual examination, but attestations in Gower almost always align with secondary meanings.

Term	Primary meaning (s)	Additional meanings relevant to Gower
Counseil (n.)	'council' (1a)	'the act of discussing or conferring' (2), 'a body of advisers to a ruler' (3a), 'an adviser' (4a), 'counsel, advice, instruction' (5a), 'a decision, plan' (6a), 'ability to advise, judgement, wisdom' (9)
Counseilen (v.)	'to counsel, advise, instruct' (1a)	'to ask advice of (someone), consult' (2a), 'to take counsel, deliberate' (3a)
Avisen (v.)	'to look at, examine' (1a)	'to learn (something), find out, discover' (2a), 'to take thought, deliberate, reflect' (3a), 'to consider, take thought' (4a), 'to decide or resolve' (5a), 'to instruct, advise, counsel, direct' (7)
Avis (n.)	'sight [...]; inspection' (1); 'information, knowledge' (2)	'act of thinking' (3a), 'forethought, prudence' (3b), 'judgement, opinion' (4a), 'advice, counsel, recommendation' (6b), 'consultation, discussion' (7)
Red (n.)	'advice, counsel' (1a(a))	'decision, purpose' (2a(a)), 'a course of action, plan' (3a(a)), 'an advisable course of action' (3a(f)), 'something advisable' (4a), 'consultation, deliberation' (5a), 'wisdom, prudence' (6a)
Reden (v.1)	'to read' (1), 'to read aloud' (2)	'to learn by reading' (3a), 'to teach; instruct' (4), 'to relate (a narrative), tell (a story)' (5a), 'to explain something [...] utter (a truth)' (5b), 'to interpret (a dream, parable, etc.)' (6), 'to perceive something, discern, grasp the meaning of' (7a), 'to counsel, give advice, advise' (8a), 'to advise, urge' (8b), 'to decide in counsel' (10).

As this chart demonstrates, the Middle English words for counsel encompass active senses that denote the ability not only to give or seek advice but also to

evaluate it. The meanings of *conseil*, *avys*, and *rede* as advice or knowledge are supplemented by a secondary semantic field that might be labelled ‘interpretation’: deliberation, consideration, reflection, thinking, forethought, judgement, consultation, explanation, perception, and decision. Gower’s use of these words exploits this secondary set of meanings and the ambiguity they imply in relation to discourse — the way in which terms like ‘deliberation’, ‘consultation’, and ‘reflection’ suggest that meaning is negotiated, interpreted, and reinterpreted — in order to render the complexity of counsel in the political and religious environment in which Amans is embedded. Counsel, Gower suggests, is a dialogic practice, one in which two or more persons attempt to reach a conclusion satisfactory to all. Because it is subject to misreading and misinterpretation at every point, the counsellor must make repeated efforts to communicate his or her meaning successfully. Of the verbs for counsel, *reden* reveals most clearly the potential for misreading that is inherent in the giving of advice, because it has two significant meanings: to advise and to read. *Reden* thus explicitly embodies the link between advice and interpretation that Gower explores in the *Confessio* as he records the dialogue of Amans and Genius.

Gower confronts readers with the ambiguity of *reden* by creating ten *rime riche* couplets using the word over the course of the poem. These couplets point to the relationships between counsel and interpretation, and textual authority and reading, by directing attention to the gap between Genius’s advice, which is given orally (within the conceit of the poem), and the exempla he cites, which come from written texts. The first two *rime riche* couplets make that gap very clear:

1. And for thin enformacion,
That thou this vice as I the rede [advise]
Eschuie schalt, a tale I rede [read],
Which fell whilom be daies olde,
So as the clerk Ovide tolde. (1.2270–74)
2. Wherof, mi Sone, for thin ese
Now herkne a tale which I rede [read],
And understond it wel, I rede [advise]. (11.3184–86)

In both of these instances, Genius uses the verb *reden* to describe his two functions: he advises and he reads. Unpacking the complex syntax of Gower’s verse reveals an implicit parallel between Amans and Genius’s sources:

1. As I advise you [*as I the rede*]
I read a tale [*a tale I rede*] (1.2271–72)
2. I read a tale [*a tale which I rede*]

I advise (you) [*I rede*] (II.3185–86)

In each of these cases, the object of *reden* is either a ‘tale’ — an authoritative text — or Amans himself; Genius is the agent who acts upon both text and supplicant. By drawing this parallel between the ‘tales’ and the lover as the objects of Genius’s action, Gower borrows the authority inherent in the adviser/advisee relationship and transfers it to Genius’s relation to his textual sources. In so doing, he invokes the secondary semantic field associated with *rede*: Genius is not merely reading his sources, but he is also *interpreting* them. These acts of interpretation cross the boundary between the spoken text and the written text, since Genius retells in his own words the stories he has read in books.

In these couplets, Gower indicates that Genius’s hermeneutic actions lead to his authority as storyteller and as adviser to Amans. But Genius also seeks to teach Amans how to *rede* texts, and he is, after all, creating new tales for Amans to *rede*:

Forthi, mi sone, I wolde rede [advise],
Be this ensample as thou myht rede [read/interpret],
Sech elles, wher thou wolt, thi grace [...]. (v.7603–05)

As be ensample thou myht rede [read/interpret];
And hold it in thi mynde, I rede [advise]. (VII.2781–82)

To se love agein kinde falle,
For that makth sore a man to falle,
As thou myht of tofore rede [read/interpret].
Forthi, my sone, I wolde rede [advise]
To lete al other love aweie [...] (VIII.2017–21)

Although Genius remains the authoritative adviser, Gower now positions Amans as the interpreter of texts, as Genius encourages Amans to embark on the same process that produced his own authority. These *rede/rede* couplets reveal Gower’s attitude toward authoritative texts and toward teaching his audience how reading and interpretation generate authority. Genius’s action of giving advice becomes parallel to the old books — authoritative but fixed in time. Interpretation — the process of making stories or advice relevant to the here and now — can only be performed by a skilful reader. In Gower’s formulation, the giving and using of advice is ultimately a reciprocal process: old books *rede* (advise) Genius and Amans, but Genius and Amans must *rede* (interpret) their contents, which leads to the ability to *rede* (advise) others, or, as Genius repeatedly informs Amans, to *avise* oneself well. By underscoring the gap between simple reading of texts and interpretation, Gower asserts interpretation as the fundamental means by which

one develops authority. He constructs the reading of his *Confessio* and also *all* reading as an act in which readers receive counsel but then have the obligation to interpret it and apply it to their own circumstances. For Gower, textual authority is meaningful but ineffective without interpretation, and the *reding* habits Genius promotes delineate how one might gain authority over any text. The process urges readers to engage Gower's text, but it also implicitly asserts his authority over the old stories that he retells from Ovid, Aristotle, chronicles, and other authoritative works that he frames as counsel on kingship for his English audiences.

On the level of individual tales, Gower similarly encourages the reader to exercise interpretive authority. His highly detailed narratives permit and often encourage multiple or even competing lessons, although Genius always selects only one. Genius's morals establish a thematic connection between tales — however incongruous — to play to Amans's interests while also teaching him serious, ethical lessons. Such strategies allow Gower to mine the aristocratic tradition of *fin amors* and redirect tales toward the more practical end of providing advice in a form to which his aristocratic audiences would likely be receptive.¹⁹ Yet Gower calls attention to the limits of Genius's interpretations and opens the door for other readings. The stories may be enjoyable, but the imposed morals are often unsatisfying oversimplifications or trite platitudes that stretch narrative plausibility. For instance, the lengthy *Tale of Constance* contains details about civic concerns such as kingship, parliament, and heredity, but Genius merely concludes that one must avoid envy and prioritize love, in a tale in which envy is exemplified by wicked mothers-in-law, not romantic rivals (II.587–1612). By contrast, when Phaeton and Icarus both disobey their fathers' orders and die, Genius explains their sins of negligence as a 'lacke of governance in wele [well-being], | Als wel in love as other weie' (IV.1070–71). However, these brief tales do not even gesture toward the general Christian love that may be read into other tales (e.g., *Constantine and Sylvester*), much less romantic love. Occasionally, Amans notices, as when he pleads 'I am amorous,' begs for exempla about 'loves cause,' and implies that Genius's lessons have not been focused on his interests (I.2258–61). By constructing in Genius an unstable authority figure, Gower promotes a strong sense of meta-ethics, the analytical mode of ethical discourse that seeks less to prescribe morality

¹⁹ Green, *Poets and Princepleasers*, pp. 142–43. See also Zeeman, 'The Verse of Courtly Love in the Framing Narrative of the *Confessio Amantis*,' on the combination of *fin amors* with moral and philosophical material; and Robins, 'Romance, Exemplum, and the Subject of the *Confessio Amantis*,' pp. 157–69, on how Gower's merging of genres creates a unique hybrid form for addressing ethical questions about the self and the world.

than to explore what constitutes a moral decision.²⁰ Gower employs a 'destabilizing hermeneutic' that is not ultimately invested in resolving disjunctions in order to underscore that morality in kingship cannot be simplified or universalized but rather is inevitably contingent, complicated, and often contradictory.²¹ This destabilization happens not only among the varieties of tales that seem to challenge or contradict each other but also within each individual tale that has an ill-fitting moral. At every turn, Gower exploits his poem's instabilities to amplify the level of deliberation and dynamic reading encouraged by the exemplum more generally.

In other words, Gower's complex narratives require readers to reinvestigate Genius's imprecise moral lessons, rather than accept any of his morals as universal truths. If Genius can declare that the brief *Tale of Icarus* — which does little more than record Icarus ignoring his father's advice — exemplifies negligence in love, can another reader not also uncover how long, detailed narratives like the *Tale of Constance* can teach more than Genius's moral to avoid envy? Often, as in *Icarus*, the unspoken meaning concerns the act of counsel itself, or, as in *Constance*, political matters that appear as 'unnecessary' details that do not attract Genius's consideration. The counsel implicit in such 'love' narratives throughout the work frequently involves broader ethical ideals reminiscent of mirrors for princes. Given that Book VII draws directly on Aristotle's advice to Alexander, it is clear that Gower never fully leaves behind the political trappings of the Prologue.²² The *Confessio's* structure continuously shifts between fundamental ideals of love and politics: Gower begins with political topics and then turns to love, but he actually continues to draw attention to political virtues, challenging readers to see the interplay between the two discourses. In this mediating space, *Florent* and *Three Questions* promote women counsellors as characters that can negotiate between amorous and political discourses: Gower creates not simply romance narratives that illustrate aristocratic virtues and end happily in marriage but also exempla that give prominence to women as model counsellors who intervene efficaciously in *political* impasses.

The Loathly Lady's Counsel and Authority

Florent resembles Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* in plot, although the distinct differences in protagonists and offences focus attention on political families and virtues

²⁰ Kuczynski, 'Gower's Metaethics', pp. 189–207.

²¹ Watt, *Amoral Gower*, pp. 151–58.

²² Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry*, pp. 221–23; McKinley, 'Kingship and the Body Politic', pp. 161–87.

in time of conflict (rather than the Wife's explicit interest in gendered power). In *Florent*, the worthy title character, a knight and nephew to the emperor, has killed the knight Branchus in self-defence; Branchus's family seeks revenge, and the elderly matriarch devises a test whereby Florent consents to submit to death if he cannot answer the impossible question of 'What alle women most desire' (l.1481). During his quest for the response, he finds that no man provides a satisfactory or even consistent answer, but he encounters a beastly hag who promises him the answer if he agrees to marry her. He reluctantly accepts, and she announces 'that alle women lievest wolde | Be sovereign of mannes love' (l.1608–09). Before reaching his destination, Florent amusingly deliberates whether it would be worse to die or to marry the hag. This unflattering moment develops a realistic, 'human' character with whom a reader could identify, and, despite some evidence of reluctance, Florent enacts obedience by keeping his promises to Branchus's family and the hag. He marries the loathly lady, and in the marriage bed, he finds instead a young, beautiful wife who offers him another dilemma: would he rather have her young and beautiful by day or night? Florent lets her choose, and by granting her sovereignty, he proves himself the best knight, which lifts the curse that had turned her into the hag and wins him a beautiful bride, the Princess of Cizile. Genius concludes that by displaying obedience in love, Florent succeeds.

It is tempting to read *Florent* alongside its analogous loathly lady tales as romances, and, although all involve marriage, Genius's amorous moral is reductive even by their standards. No source has been identified for the four loathly lady tales in Middle English, the roughly contemporary *Florent* and Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, and the fifteenth-century ballads *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*. All address women's sovereignty, but all intersect with political themes, too, such as the Queen's intercession to modify Arthur's sentencing of the rapist knight in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the uneasy relationship between Arthur and a disenfranchised knight or baron that frames the conflict in *Ragnelle* and the *Marriage of Gawain*, or the problems created in *Ragnelle* when Gawain prefers to spend time with his beautiful wife rather than participate in knightly activities. The tales also have analogues in Irish narratives with indisputably political implications, in which the hag embodies the rule of Ireland and both advises and empowers the man who dares to embrace her.²³ As a loathly lady tale, Gower's *Florent* emphasizes the need for knights to maintain their reputations by keeping public and private

²³ See Bollard, 'Sovereignty and the Loathly Lady', pp. 41–59; and Passmore, 'Through the Counsel of a Lady', pp. 8–13.

oaths, arguably an important political lesson for any aristocratic audience.²⁴ Yet the fundamental political lesson that binds *Florent* to the broader discourses of the *Confessio* derives from the tale's illustration of a process of counsel. Gower combines 'exemplary logic' with a plot that belongs to the courtly tradition in order to develop not only an ideal marriage but also an ideal model of counsel that emphasizes the remembering and application of advice. This treatment of woman counsellor and male aristocrat sets the foundation for how Gower will deploy women and domestic relationships to think through more explicitly political behaviour in the *Three Questions*.

The *Tale of Florent* is actually a twinned narrative about the hag/princess and aristocratic knight, whose stories intersect at the moment she gives him counsel. Although she does not appear for about 120 lines in the English text (which begins by introducing Florent), Gower's marginal gloss focuses first on the loathly lady:

Hic contra amori inobedientes ad commendacionem Obediencie Confessor super eodem exemplum ponit; vbi dicit quod, cum quedam Regis Cizilie filia in sue iuuentutis floribus pulcherrima ex eius Nouerce incantacionibus in vetulam turpissimam transformata extitit, Florencius tunc Imparatoris Claudi Nepos, miles in armis strenuissimus amorosisque legibus intendens, ipsam ex sua obediencia in pulcritudinem pristinam mirabiliter reformauit.

Here against those disobedient to love and as commendation to Obedience, the Confessor presents an instructive example on the same thing, where he tells that, when a certain daughter of the King of Sicily who was most beautiful in the bloom of her youth but transformed into a most ugly old woman by her stepmother's incantation, Florent, then the nephew of the Emperor Claudius, a knight most strenuous in fighting and committed to the laws of love, miraculously refashioned her, because of his obedience, into her original beauty.²⁵

The gloss tells her story and establishes her as an alternative protagonist.²⁶ Instead of creating a standard, flat exemplum of one man's obedience, Gower constructs a double narrative that joins the stories of Florent's exemplarity and the loathly lady's enchantment. By privileging the hag/princess in the Latin gloss, Gower signals her importance to the story, and the consideration of both protagonists is foundational to understanding how the tale turns on counsel.

²⁴ Passmore, 'Through the Counsel of a Lady', pp. 14–18.

²⁵ The lines appear alongside l.1408ff, the first English lines of the tale, and are printed in Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. by Peck, I, p. 316n.

²⁶ Beidler, 'Transformations in Gower's *Tale of Florent*', pp. 100–14; and Batchelor, 'Feigned Truth and Exemplary Method', pp. 6–9.

The English text introduces Florent as a ‘worthi knyht’ praised repeatedly for his ‘mochel myhte’ and his aspirations for chivalric and amorous achievements (1.1408–17). Unlike the rapist knight of the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, Florent possesses integrity and undertakes his impossible quest under nobler moral circumstances, so he does not need a dramatic character shift to redeem himself.²⁷ But this is precisely the point that resonates with mirrors for princes: of *course* the lord receiving instruction is worthy and has integrity, but counsel can enhance his reputation further. Florent is already a model of obedience throughout the tale; although Gower provides insight into his very human desires to avoid his fate and laments the impending marriage (1.1568–87, 1.1703–17), Florent keeps his word. Were the tale concerned only with general obedience, it might end after he weds the hag and thus fulfils his last promise. But Gower has chosen to use a loathly lady romance for his exemplum, and one must ask what else that particular narrative allows him to accomplish. First, following the loathly lady tale to its end allows Genius to ‘conclude in special’ regarding love — to create the relevance to love that Amans desires from his stories — and to moralize that ‘Obedience in love availleth’ (1.1401). More importantly, by making certain choices that distinguish this loathly lady tale from its analogues, Gower stresses the counsel that yokes the princess of the Latin gloss to the knight of the English text. He thereby produces a narrative in which obedience to counsel (not love) becomes the source of the mutually beneficial conclusion.

Through the multiple tests of the loathly lady tale, Gower dramatizes how one must remember and *use* counsel rather than simply be willing to hear it (arguably a critical lesson, since a prince might feasibly ignore or not recognize useful counsel, which occurs in *Rehoboam*). When Florent sets out to discover what women desire, Branchus’s grandmother tests his ability to take advice by giving him time ‘That [he] therof myhte ben avised’, and she orders him to ‘Tak conseil’ regarding the question (1.1467, 1484). He seeks advice from his uncle and the wisest men of the court, but ‘of on assent | Thei myhte noght acorde plat’ (1.1494–95). Gower then depicts an alternative source of counsel that contrasts in every way to male aristocrats when Florent encounters the beastly hag in the forest. He presents their exchange in terms of advice offered and accepted when the hag first addresses the knight:

[...] Florent be thi name,
Thou hast on honde such a game,
That bot thou be the betre avised,

²⁷ See Fradenburg, ‘The Wife of Bath’s Passing Fancy’, pp. 51–56; and, on Florent’s integrity, Yeager, *John Gower’s Poetic*, p. 137.

Thi deth is schapen and devised,
 That al the world ne mai thee save,
 Bot if that thou my conseil have. (l.1541–46)

She boldly claims the role of adviser, and Florent acknowledges her as such when, ‘of hir conseil he hir preide’ (l.1549). She also warns that, ‘And if thou go with-oute red, | Thou schalt be sekerliche ded’ (l.1563–64). No analogous loathly lady tale describes the scene where the knight meets the hag with such a concentration of advice terms. The fifteenth-century analogues show the hag accosting Arthur and offering her answer in exchange for marriage to Gawain, without focusing heavily on issues of counsel.²⁸ Chaucer’s hag, although she educates the knight well enough, simply introduces herself as wise and immediately strikes her bargain with the knight (*Wife of Bath’s Tale*, ll. 1000–04). Only Gower deliberately contextualizes the scene as critical advice by peppering the exchange with ‘counseil’, ‘avyse’, and ‘red’, words that point toward instruction and may always have carried latent political connotations, even in a romance.²⁹ Certainly Florent, the emperor’s nephew, finds himself in his predicament because of political machinations — Branchus’s family dares not openly seek revenge because of his powerful uncle but rather seeks to trap him through the impossible question.

When Florent returns to give his answer, Gower again asserts the primacy of counsel by noting: ‘Forth with his conseil cam the lord’ (l.1631). Then, he underscores Florent’s realization that, having tried other options, the hag’s answer alone can save him:

And thanne he hath trewly supposed
 That he him may of nothing yelpe,
 Bot if so be tho wordes helpe,
 Whiche as the womman hath him tawht;
 Wherof he hath an hope cawht
 That he schal ben excused so,
 And tolde out plein his wille tho. (l.1650–56)

²⁸ *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, ed. by Hahn, ll. 253–69 (p. 54), and *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, ed. by Hahn, ll. 69–83 (p. 364). The closest link to counsel appears when Ragnelle ‘rede[s]’ that Arthur speak with her for she may save his life (l. 256), and she tells Arthur that she knows his ‘councelle’, a word that may pun on the ‘secret’ of his predicament as well as advice (l. 264); Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. *counseil* (n.), def. 8. Although *Ragnelle* emphasizes her knowledge and influence, the author does not elsewhere make her counsel paramount to the narrative, and, in fact, her influence on Gawain arguably becomes a liability when he chooses to stay with her rather than participate in usual knightly displays (ll. 805–10, p. 69); see Leech, ‘Why Dame Ragnelle Had to Die’, pp. 223–27.

²⁹ Barnes, *Counsel and Strategy in Middle English Romance*, pp. 29–30.

Florent simply repeats what ‘the womman hath him tawht’ as if it reflects ‘his wille’. Unlike the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, the authoritative voice declaring, ‘That alle wommen lievest wolde | Be sovereign of mannes love’ belongs to the hag, not the knight (I.1608–09). In fact, most direct speech comes from the hag/princess or Branchus’s grandmother, while Florent’s only dialogue occurs with the hag/princess. Even Gower’s allocation of speech strengthens the hag’s role as the adviser who guides Florent so that his ‘wille’ aligns with her words.

The second impossible dilemma that Florent faces in the marriage bed tests his ability to heed and enact the hag’s counsel. When he must decide her fate to be beautiful by day or night, his bride submits to his decision, telling him ‘we ben bothe on’ (I.1793). Her statement accurately reflects the way the legal and social systems viewed a married couple, as one entity for which the husband acted as spokesperson. Here, however, Gower challenges the assumption that women had little or no say in the decisions affecting them. While the hag/princess does not dictate Florent’s decision, she nevertheless gives him a clue to the right answer by reminding him to ‘thenke on that he seide, | Whan that he tok hire be the hond’ (I.1796–97). These lines do not invoke the marriage ceremony to encourage payment of the physical marital debt, as Florent initially fears (and simply obeying his marital obligations and turning to his wife would not secure the tale’s rewards). Her bedroom reminder instead refers to their actions in the forest:

And thus this yonge lusti knyht
Unto this olde lothly wiht
Tho seide: ‘If that non other chance
Mai make my deliverance,
Bot only thilke same speche
Which, as thou saist, thou schalt me teche,
Have hier myn hond, I schal thee wedde’. (I.1581–87)

Their joining of hands in promise of marriage functions as a mnemonic technique that connects the scene of instruction in the forest with the bedroom dilemma.³⁰ Immediately after Florent took her hand, the hag revealed the answer that women wish most for sovereignty. At first, this static piece of knowledge lacks a concrete application, like so many lessons or proverbs, but the hag foreshadows a later need for the information in her conclusion ‘And let nothing out of thi minde’ (I.1618). Florent must remember her teaching, not just so he can repeat it to Branchus’s family,

³⁰ On such techniques, see Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, pp. 5–6. See also, Ricks, ‘Metamorphosis in Other Words’, pp. 39–41, on the rhyming echoes in the forest and bedroom scenes.

but also for future use; in the bedroom, her counsel has direct relevance to their circumstances, and her speech on women's sovereignty can again ensure his deliverance.

Whether the knights in the loathly lady tales consciously grant sovereignty to their wives rather than just throwing their hands up in confusion has always been a matter of heated scholarly debate. Gower does not explicitly say that Florent recognizes the similarities between his two dilemmas or realizes that he must apply the hag's advice, but the textual evidence and the hag/princess's gentle prodding plausibly suggest that he does. When Florent grants his wife sovereignty, he addresses her as 'O ye, my lyves hele' — my life's salvation (l.1821). More than a throwaway courtly term of endearment, this epithet recognizes that the hag/princess, and implicitly her advice, saved his life so recently. By granting her sovereignty without objections like those he entertained in the forest, Florent demonstrates that he has fully embraced obedience to his spouse.³¹ He frees them both only by proving to be a model student.

Considering what is at stake for each character reveals how Florent and the hag/princess exemplify an ideal process of counsel. His answer determines whether or not she remains under her stepmother's spell; it serves her best interests to prepare him to answer her question correctly. Yet her counsel in the forest is hardly self-serving, for she cannot be certain that he will apply it to restore her beauty later. Her bedroom language crucially urges him away from a wilful decision, toward remembering and fulfilling her counsel. From Florent's perspective, his reputation hangs in the balance. While Gower only implies this concern through Florent's early shame at his loathly betrothed, the fifteenth-century analogues clarify the ramifications of the knight's dilemma. *Ragnelle's* hero explicitly laments that were she ugly during the day, his reputation at court would suffer and that were she ugly at night, he would have a disappointing home life (ll. 667–74). *The Marriage of Gawain* humorously depicts Gawain's impulsive response that he prefers her fair by night; to encourage him toward the 'right' answer, the woman must remind him of the negative impact an ugly wife by day would have for his courtly reputation (ll. 155–67). These later romances expose the real choice that the knight faces between his public reputation and private marital happiness. Any knight would wish to secure both and so would be unable to make a selfish decision; Florent's will is at an impasse, and he must resort to using his memory and intellect to decide instead by applying his wife's earlier lesson to his new predicament.³²

³¹ Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic*, p. 140.

³² Florent exemplifies what Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, pp. 1–3, describes as memory's role in mediating between intellect and will in order to refocus the mind on the common profit. See also, Dimmick, "Redinge of Romance" in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, p. 129.

Florent conveys to aristocratic readers the distinction between having a reputation and acting accordingly. The successful removal of the curse confirms Florent's ideal status because it depends on external forces; this loathly lady cannot change her own form like the Wife of Bath's hag. After her transformation, she explains that only winning the love and sovereignty of the best knight would lift the curse, and although 'men sein' Florent was that knight, 'The dede *proeveth* it is so' (l.1850–51, my emphasis). The confirmation of his identity as an obedient, true knight evokes mirrors for princes, which are founded on the premise that the lord already possesses virtuous qualities but must continue to actively practise them. In this light, enacting the hag's advice proves Florent's exemplarity, and her change physically authenticates his submission to her teachings. He already behaves nobly and knows what women desire, but his fortunes and the hag's fate depend on whether he continues to act appropriately. As a result, Gower establishes for readers that even the worthiest man must continue to demonstrate his integrity, and he presents Florent's activities as models: seeking counsel widely, heeding advice from an authority, and avoiding self-interest to the exclusion of others' concerns.

Gower's loathly lady tale reflects his distinctive perspective on how a supposedly marginalized counsellor can deliver authoritative advice. On the most basic level, the hag/princess can answer the 'woman' question because she is the only woman Florent consults. Here Gower differs starkly from the analogues: the fifteenth-century romances indicate that the knights poll both men and women, and Chaucer's knight obtains a variety of answers exclusively from women. Gower also assigns her a different kind of authority, too, as the antithesis to the male, courtly counsellors whose advice was ineffective. Her location in the forest, her gender, and her physical beastliness distinguish her from Florent's masculine, aristocratic identity.³³ Only Gower and the anonymous author of *Ragnelle* amplify her otherness by detailing the multiple ways the hag's physical appearance cannot be assimilated to noble standards.³⁴ Although Gower first describes her vaguely as a 'lothly wommannysch figure' and the ugliest creature Florent has ever seen (l.1529–32), he later accentuates in great detail her repulsive appearance, from her graceless visage with beady eyes and wrinkled, sagging skin to her deformed and stooped body (l.1678–87). Repulsed because 'Sche hath no lith

³³ See also Williams, *The Invention of Womanhood*, pp. 54–58.

³⁴ Compare *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, ed. by Hahn, ll. 231–51 (pp. 53–54); and *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, ed. by Hahn, ll. 57–64 (p. 364). Chaucer offers virtually no physical description aside from repeated general statements that the woman is foul, old, or poor (*Wife of Bath's Tale*, ll. 999, 1063, 1072, 1082, 1100–01, 1206–07, 1213, and 1220).

[limb] withoute a lak', Genius exclaims that her body 'myhte a mannes lust des-tourbe!' (l.1688–91). In shame, Florent travels with her only by night (l.1726–32), and, once home, his serving women attempt to improve her appearance, but their efforts backfire and render her even 'foulere on to se' (l.1759). Genius's focus on her hideousness is a kind of anti-aesthetic turn that accentuates her abjection and men's disgust at her physical form. Yet paradoxically, this status as entirely 'other' in fact authorizes her counsel by underscoring how she voices a feminine perspective that educates the protagonist away from his polarizing masculine, aristocratic viewpoint.³⁵ More specifically, the loathly lady counsellor embodies the recommendation from mirrors for princes that a ruler must seek counsel from all levels of society, especially from a lowly counsellor, in order to display his great humility and serve the interests of the entire kingdom. For example, in the *Secretum secretorum*, Aristotle occupies a lower social position than Alexander, and so Alexander humbles himself by submitting to his mentor's teachings. For Judith Ferster, this status difference emphasizes the importance of taking advice especially from those of lower rank, because, to serve the common profit, 'at times the humanly created distinctions between people should be ignored.'³⁶ Gower's English text compounds the 'otherness' of the adviser by adding gender difference as the defining feature of the 'other' yet essential adviser to princes.

The marriage of the aristocratic Florent to the hag/princess allows Gower simultaneously to engage ideas about class or gender conflict and to back away from them. As a number of scholars have shown, women in romance, particularly loathly ladies, may represent class conflict, other marginalized members of society, or the realm itself.³⁷ These ideas have resonance for the fifteenth-century analogue *Ragnelle*, which the anonymous author unmistakably sets within a political conflict: King Arthur has given a knight's lands to his nephew Gawain, which precipitates Arthur's search for the answer to the woman question and his promise that Gawain

³⁵ Fein, 'Other Thought-Worlds', pp. 336–41, has argued that the elements of faery magic in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* evoke an 'otherworldly' and feminine worldview previously alien to the protagonist knight; his encounter with the hag 'forces him to a self-recognition' and to reform his attitudes toward women. Faery magic is muted in *Florent*, but the sense of a powerful feminine 'other' unknown to (or unrecognized by) men appears in multiple forms: the wicked stepmother, the wily grandmother, and the clever hag/princess. *Florent* plausibly makes a stronger case for feminine knowledge as relevant to men's views, since Genius supposedly bases it on a historical 'cronique' (l.1404), not a distant Arthurian fantasy.

³⁶ Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, pp. 45–47, at p. 47.

³⁷ See Duby, *The Knight, the Lady, and the Priest*, trans. by Barbara Bray, pp. 107–39; Lindahl, 'The Oral Undertones of Late Medieval Romance', pp. 69–70; and Passmore, 'Through the Counsel of a Lady', pp. 3–13.

will wed the hag to obtain it. Gawain's marriage to hideous Ragnelle and her subsequent transformation represent 'how the unknown, the marvelous, or the threatening is brought into line with legitimate, normative, idealized chivalric society', or how the 'other' is reconciled to the *status quo*.³⁸ Although the disenfranchised knight becomes infuriated when Arthur returns with the correct answer, Ragnelle, revealed to be the knight's sister, uses her new ties to the king and Gawain to reconcile the men. While this tale post-dates Gower, it underlines the potential for Middle English loathly lady romances to reflect on political and class conflict, or even on the state of the realm itself. *Ragnelle* also displays a general common theme with Gower's Prologue: it suggests that there is a problem within the state that needs remedying, and in *Ragnelle*, the hag facilitates that remedy twice over, by saving the king's life and by reconciling the king to her brother.

But in *Florent*, no similar conflict between the couple's lands requires mending. Instead, Gower focuses on the relationship between Florent and the lady, whose marriage and dependence upon each other symbolize the mutual interdependence of people that he emphasizes throughout the *Confessio*.³⁹ In addition to articulating standard assumptions about marriage, the claim 'We ben bothe on' reflects this interdependence (l.1793). Gower structures the tale's resolution not around political reconciliation but rather to accord more generally with the ethical idea of mutual benefit. This benefit may not be limited to their domestic relationship, if the hag figures other marginalized members of society or the realm. The tale imagines broadly that a woman counsellor can advise an aristocratic man so that his decisions break free of self-interest, a lesson that can have wide-ranging applications for princely audiences. Moreover, by marrying the hag/princess, Florent enters into a permanent relationship with his counsellor, symbolizing his continued ties to the wisdom and otherness that she represents.

The alternate perspective of Gower's Latin gloss, however, would seem to complicate the authority that the hag derives from her otherness, since he prevents us from fully seeing her as a lower-status 'other' by identifying her as the cursed Princess of Cizile. This royal status provides additional authority, for although she is not yet a queenly intercessor, historically, royal daughters received training in the tasks of counsel and persuasion that would enable them to become successful intercessors after marriage.⁴⁰ Gower draws on the traditional expectations

³⁸ *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, ed. by Hahn, p. 41.

³⁹ On mutual interdependence in general, see Porter, 'Gower's Ethical Microcosm and Political Macrocosm', pp. 135–62; and Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry*, pp. 219–29.

⁴⁰ See Parsons, 'Mothers, Daughters, Marriage, Power', pp. 73–75.

that the English people had for royal women to perform interventions that evoke Marian intercession in order to sway a king to change his mind. Chronicle depictions of Joan of Kent, Queen Philippa, and Queen Anne imply that persuasion on behalf of the less powerful was an English royal woman's obligation.⁴¹ Those 'less powerful' may be classified as the poor, the oppressed, or even a noble who at the given moment wields less power than another. For example, in addition to assisting the legitimately poor, Joan mediates between King Richard and John of Gaunt, and when Anne intercedes with Thomas of Gloucester in 1388 in a failed attempt to spare the life of Simon Burley, she acts not only for Burley but also on behalf of her husband Richard.⁴² These cases demonstrate the real fluctuations in power that can occur, much like the twist of fate that puts Florent at the mercy of Branchus's grandmother. No one historical intercession seems to have directly influenced the *Confessio*, but the consistent record of royal women as intercessors establishes that they were perceived as having the authority to persuade, or attempt to persuade, nobles and their husbands or family members — both in public and in private circumstances.⁴³ By identifying the loathly hag of *Florent* as royalty from the outset, Gower grants her a recognized level of authority to intervene. And through the hag, he imagines the role of queenly intercessor as one that truly speaks for the disenfranchised, 'other' members of society.

As a complex whole, the twinned narrative of *Florent* finally exemplifies the way counsel should work through the specialized dual role that Gower devises for the hag/princess. The English text employs the hag as a lowly counsellor to call attention to Florent's obedience and the interdependence of people, whereas the Latin gloss creates authority for her by presenting her as a cursed princess, not a lower-status hag. She is a capable adviser who can function as both the wise royal intercessor and the 'other' who represents interests beyond the advised man's personal life. *Florent* concludes with the knight's domestic bliss but gives only a limited sense of the woman counsellor's impact on the politics of his realm (other than the obvious rescue of the Emperor's nephew), but Gower takes up more explicitly political topics in the *Tale of Three Questions*.

⁴¹ For example, see Maidstone, *Concordia*, ed. by Carlson, ll. 223–31, 429–50 (pp. 62–63, 72–73). See also Nelson, 'Medieval Queenship', pp. 179–208.

⁴² *The St Albans Chronicle*, ed. and trans. by Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, p. 750, and *The Westminster Chronicle*, ed. and trans. by Hector and Harvey, p. 330.

⁴³ For evidence of the ongoing tradition, see Parsons, 'Mothers, Daughters, Marriage, Power', pp. 63–78; and Nelson, 'Medieval Queenship', pp. 179–208.

'Thing which a man mai noght areche': The Tale of Three Questions

For yit par chaunce I may purchace
 With som good word the kinges grace,
 Your lif and ek your good to save.
 For ofte schal a womman have
 Thing which a man mai noght areche. (I.3203–07)

With these words, the young girl Peronelle convinces her father to let her intercede for him with their rash king. She articulates the important hypothesis that a woman can have the potential to succeed where a man would fail. The events of the tale shore up her claim, and her intervention in a battle of wits between her father Petro and their king Alphonse saves her father's life and counsels the king to more noble behaviour. The *Three Questions* clarifies the woman adviser's relationship to the political by engaging with the sensitive matter of advising a king. Gower transfers Peronelle's authority from the domestic sphere to the king's court and, finally, to the king himself through marriage. This marriage may smooth over the challenge to gendered hierarchies presented by Peronelle's authoritative actions, but it also offers a new vision of political counsel in which lord and counsellor are mutually beneficial partners.

The *Three Questions* begins with the young King Alphonse who, despite his own great wisdom, envies Petro, the knight in his court who always quickly answers his clever riddles. He contrives three riddles to test Petro, to earn himself the highest reputation for wisdom, and to arrange to kill Petro and confiscate his goods if the knight cannot answer satisfactorily. Alphonse sends Petro from court with three weeks to return with the answers to the following riddles: 'What thing in his degré | Of al this world hath nede lest, | And yet men helpe it althermost [most]', 'What most is worth, | And of costage [expense] is lest put forth', and 'Which is of most cost, | And lest is worth and goth to lost [ruin]?' (I.3099–3106). The narrative then shifts to the domestic as Petro returns home and his youngest daughter persuades him to confide in her. He admits that he sees no solution to the king's test, so Peronelle suggests that he allow her to answer for him. He follows her counsel, placing his life and goods in her hands. At court, she deftly delivers the answers: the earth, humility, and pride. She impresses Alphonse so much that he claims that he would marry her if only her father were of higher status. When he offers her any worldly gift as reward, Peronelle requests and receives more property for her father, which elevates Petro to a peer of the kingdom. Now that she is technically eligible, Peronelle urges Alphonse to keep his word, and they marry. Genius then reports that chronicles record Alphonse as

a noble king (rather than the proud, envious king the tale introduced) and praises Peronelle for saving her father and making herself a queen through her humble speech (l.3387–3402).

Peronelle's role is notable for its challenges to the patriarchy: she usurps her father's role twice by speaking at court and by arranging her own marriage.⁴⁴ But it is also remarkable for the way that her intervention intersects with Gower's political concerns, particularly his abiding interest in shaping the ruler's will to serve the common profit. Peronelle shares some basic similarities with the hag/princess in *Florent*, but she expands and clarifies the role of a female counsellor within the politicized contexts of the court and the king's need for correction.⁴⁵ Her intervention challenges the boundary between the domestic and political spheres, and it asserts that rather than exist in a static hierarchy of male domination, men and women each have responsibility for their collective fortunes, no matter who exercises public authority.⁴⁶ In part, this shared responsibility can be traced back to two commonplaces in the *Confessio*: that the fates of mankind are intertwined and that marriage should be represented positively as the solution to lovers' pains. In addition, this particular marriage firmly solidifies the connection of a woman's counsel to the political realm: Gower suggests not only that Peronelle's advice can be beneficial to father, husband, and kingdom but also that her feminine performance allows her access to a form of authority that eludes her father and enables her to correct her king.

The tale's framework extols Peronelle as the exemplar of humility, although her bold negotiation to marry Alphonse hardly seems to illustrate that virtue. In fact, her behaviour openly contrasts the exemplary humility outlined in Gower's *Mirour de l'Omme*, because she ascends the social ladder rather than remaining in a lowly position (ll. 12433–43, 12535–40).⁴⁷ This inconsistency and the heavy focus on Peronelle's role invite the reader to consider what else the tale might exemplify, especially considering that Gower seems to have developed this story specifically for the *Confessio*. Neither a daughter nor a king in need of correction appear in the *Mirour* treatment of a similar set of riddles in only twelve lines (the

⁴⁴ Bullón-Fernández, *Fathers and Daughters in John Gower's Confessio Amantis*, pp. 64–75.

⁴⁵ See also Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic*, p. 140–44, for similarities in the male protagonists of *Florent* and *Three Questions*.

⁴⁶ Although earlier scholars posited the theory of separate spheres in which men and women interacted in the Middle Ages, historians and literary scholars now instead explore the places where men's and women's lives are interdependent. See Coss, *The Lady in Medieval England*, pp. 1–5; and Owens, 'Noblewomen and Political Activity', pp. 211–13.

⁴⁷ Bullón-Fernández, *Fathers and Daughters in John Gower's Confessio Amantis*, pp. 70–71.

only source identifiable with certainty).⁴⁸ The framework in the *Mirour* differs starkly: there are only two questions about humility and pride, the interaction occurs between men of equal social status, and the final lesson distinguishes the body from the soul (ll. 12601–12). Gower offers no indication of the broader narrative that he produces in the *Confessio*. The innovations of the king's challenge, of the difference in social status between the men, and of the daughter's intercession alter the bare *Mirour* version to produce a coherent tale about the process of advice-giving. Especially because Peronelle takes her father's place at court, Gower places feminized counsel at the very centre of the *Three Questions* in the form of the submissive and intercessory tactics that Peronelle uses to advise Alphonse. In so doing, he imagines advice-giving as a gendered performance and the ideal lord-counsellor relationship as a marriage that brings security and stability to the kingdom.

At the tale's beginning, Alphonse's immature pride, his need to be recognized as the wisest authority in the kingdom, animates the narrative (l.3067–97). Because the king sees the exceedingly clever Petro as a competitor, he cannot appreciate the knight's wisdom independent of his own proud aspirations (a violation of Gower's assertion in Book VII that kings should be pleased to have wise counsellors).⁴⁹ To regain the upper hand, Alphonse presents the three difficult questions to which Petro must respond or forfeit his life and goods, and he forestalls the knight's usual rapid response by allotting him three weeks to mull over the solutions (and, likely, his predicament). Petro may know the answers, but Gower prioritizes the delivery of his responses by recording the stipulation that '[...] if so be that he misconteth, | To make in his answer a faile', the result is death and confiscation of property (l.3112–16). This threat indicates that more is at stake than just the answer: *miscounten* means 'to calculate incorrectly', as a failure to strategize, not a mathematical error, and the Old French root *mesconter* points specifically toward miscalculations in the truth or quality of speech.⁵⁰ Thus, if Petro miscalculates, misspeaks, or errs in the least, he forfeits. By even answering questions regarding humility and pride, he would veer dangerously close to lecturing on a vice that Alphonse clearly possesses, which easily might be perceived

⁴⁸ Gower, *The Complete Works*, ed. by Macaulay, *Mirour*, ll. 12601–12. Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic*, p. 140.

⁴⁹ See *The Courtiers and the Fool* (VII.3945–4026) and *The Folly of Rehoboam* (VII.4027–4146).

⁵⁰ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v., *miscounten* (v.). Hindley, Langley, and Levy, *Old French-English Dictionary*, s.v. *mesconter* (v.) and *mesconte* (n.).

as criticizing the king. Furthermore, Petro would find it difficult to both answer the questions himself and not appear to violate the lesson of humility that the riddles promote. He finds himself in an impossible situation: if he does not respond to the king's questions, he loses; if he answers, he risks displeasing the king and giving Alphonse grounds to execute him for other reasons.

The similarities to *Florent* are instructive. As in the sovereignty question in the loathly lady tales, the character presenting the challenge both knows the answers and hopes that the knight will find death through responding incorrectly. Gower thereby indicates the supreme extent of Alphonse's pride: he would rather execute one of his wisest men than be considered less clever. For *Florent*, the difficulty lies in finding the solution. For Petro, who characteristically solves any riddle, the difficulty lies less in finding the answers and more in presenting them safely. *Florent* introduces a specific exemplar of obedience who is receptive to counsel, while the *Tale of Three Questions* addresses the real-world problem of a powerful male who is hostile to advice that he needs to become an ethical ruler. In essence, Petro struggles with a problem familiar to the authors of advice to princes: how to discuss with a king important ethical processes and moral virtues, especially ones that might be perceived as disparaging the king, without inviting danger to one's own person. The solution to Petro's dilemma resembles the solution some authors and translators of mirrors for princes employed, in which Aristotle served as a screen for the writer's criticism of his patron.⁵¹ Rather than speaking through an authoritative voice like Aristotle, Petro selects the most humble and least authoritative screen — his young daughter, who presents no substantial threat to the king and can convince Alphonse to reconsider his position.

From Peronelle's first appearance, Gower characterizes her as possessing humility and an awareness of authority. When Petro returns home to 'take avise-ment' and encounters her in the garden, Genius presents her as an ideal daughter (l.3121). At fourteen, she is Petro's youngest child, and she possesses a 'riht fair' visage, stature resembling a 'hevenely figure', and 'goodli' speech and manners (l.3133–39). She is young, beautiful, and the physical opposite of *Florent*'s hag, but Gower establishes each as occupying a lowly position (and even Gower's Latin prefatory gloss does not reveal Peronelle's eventual advancement, unlike the gloss to *Florent*). When Peronelle addresses her father, her physical placement signals her respectful submission to him: 'Upon hire knes sche gan down falle | With humble herte and to him calle' (l.3145–46). She positions herself as her father's favourite and as the best person to whom he should 'telle a privité' —

⁵¹ Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, p. 44.

reveal a secret (l.3157).⁵² Through her posture and by weeping, Peronelle convinces him to confide in her out of familial love. When he reveals his dilemma, she provides Petro with the only form of ‘avisement’ he receives:

Mi fader, sithen it is so,
That ye can se non other weie,
Bot that ye moste nedes deie,
I wolde preie of you a thing:
Let me go with you to the king,
And ye schull make him understonde
How ye, my wittes for to fonde,
Have leid your ansuere upon me;
And telleth him, in such degré
Upon my word ye wole abide
To lif or deth, what so betide. (l.3192–3202)

Peronelle acknowledges Petro’s paralysis and devises a pretence that allows her to intercede without diminishing his intelligence. This plan also grants her authority, since her actions will directly impact her father, and he must agree to abide by her words. When Petro consents ‘To do the conseil of this maide’, he relinquishes his paternal hold (l.3217). In Peronelle’s words to her father, Gower explicitly indicates that she performs a role that could only be fulfilled by a woman, as shown in the epigraph to this section (l.3203–07). In *Florent*, the hag could answer the ‘woman question’ better than a man because she possessed knowledge about her sex. *Three Questions* complicates such a limited view of women’s capacities because its riddles do not concern sex or gender, so gendered knowledge does not explain Peronelle’s authority. She asserts the specific power of counsel (‘som good word’), not only intercession, that a woman may possess that a man cannot access. Gower implies that she can better answer Alphonse’s riddles because women’s assumed submissive position in society allows her certain strategies not as readily available to her father.

In this respect, Peronelle resembles Chaucer’s women such as Prudence or Hippolyta whose ‘wifely eloquence’ uniquely enables them to intercede with their husbands. As David Wallace’s reading of the *Melibee* suggests, men would

⁵² Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. *priveté* (n.), def. 2b. Because Petro easily relinquishes control over his daughter, I read ‘prively’ and ‘privete’ as evoking the private, domestic setting and referring to Petro’s secret. For the possibility of incestuous undertones, see Bullón-Fernández, *Fathers and Daughters in John Gower’s Confessio Amantis*, pp. 68–74, and Donavin, *Incest Narratives and the Structure of Gower’s Confessio Amantis*, pp. 56–7, 142–49.

fail to soften another man's ire: '[s]ince the idea of a man working "chaunge" in the breast of a more powerful male upsets all norms of heterosexual propriety, it follows that a woman, and a woman's body, must be placed in the line of fire.'⁵³ In this equation, womanhood and its presumed inferiority move a man's emotions to pity or clemency. A similar theme more generally appears in other contemporary works, including cases in which women persuade men who are not their husbands or fathers. For example, in Gower's *Tale of Constantine and Sylvester*, the sight of mothers weeping over their infants moves Constantine to spare the children's lives, and in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, the intervention of the mourning widows who wish to bury their dead husbands according to wifely and religious customs influences Theseus to act on their behalf.⁵⁴ Although these instances are not individual interventions, in each case, women possess a unique power to inspire pity, mercy, and humility in even the most powerful of men. Such examples provide a convincing explanation for Peronelle's declaration that, 'ofte schal a womman have | Thing which a man mai noght areche' (l.3206–07). Her words reveal Gower's acute awareness of woman's distinctive power to advise the king more directly and more safely than a man might dare, especially if emotions such as rage or pride are involved. Her actions at court likewise illustrate woman's capacity to challenge male authority without presenting a threat. While the *Melibee*, *Knight's Tale*, and *Constantine and Sylvester* examples emphasize a wife's private persuasion of her husband or the invocation of wifely or motherly duties, Peronelle speaks in court, has no such ties to Alphonse to authorize her intervention, and far exceeds the bounds of the typical father-daughter relationship. Through her, Gower depicts the effectiveness of an individual, feminine persona at giving specifically public political counsel.

The scene at court provides an imagined audience's reaction to Petro's deferral of authority to Peronelle. In a reversal of patriarchal order, Peronelle leads her father into court, where he humbly kneels to the king and explains that she will answer for him. The courtiers' shock registers that this deferral runs contrary to normal expectations:

Tho was ther gret merveile on honde,
That he, which was so wys a knyht,
His lif upon so yong a wyht
Besette wolde in jeupartie,
And manye it hielden for folie. (l.3234–38)

⁵³ Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, p. 237.

⁵⁴ See Williams, *The Invention of Womanhood*, p. 27; Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, pp. 198–99; and Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, pp. 35 and 134–40.

As Robert F. Yeager has suggested, ceding authority to his daughter and appearing foolish to the court constitute Petro's great displays of humility, which allow him to escape death.⁵⁵ But the inherently marginalized and humble position in which society places Peronelle is also on display. Society, represented by the court, views her as powerless because she is a young woman, which enables her to speak freely because she cannot be viewed as a legitimate rival to the king's authority. In other words, the court's 'merveille' contributes paradoxically to her authority by positioning her as a non-threatening counsellor.

Peronelle's rhetoric and public performance reinforce her supposed position in a submissive and deferential role. When Peronelle speaks, she respectfully addresses Alphonse as 'Mi lord' or 'Mi liege lord'. She also specifically asks him to *heed* her words, not just hear them: 'Mi lord, if ye woll take kepe' (l.3274).⁵⁶ She gently reminds him that he must not only know of the topics she will discuss but also act accordingly. This line appears immediately prior to her discussion of humility, where it is certainly most relevant. Her answers evoke Marian intercession, the model that authorizes English queens to intercede with their husbands, but Peronelle assumes a more active role, independent of male control.⁵⁷ Gower evokes the Marian tradition to demonstrate how well Peronelle suits the role of queen that she will eventually occupy once she has persuaded Alphonse to act according to virtue.

With all signs firmly in place that Peronelle is, indeed, a deferential subject, Gower then moves her beyond the passive influence attributed to Marian intercession. After pointing to the moral value of humility over pride, Peronelle respectfully pressures Alphonse to act accordingly:

Thus have I seid that I wol seie
Of myn answer, and to you preie,
Mi liege lord, of youre office
That ye such grace and such justice
Ordeigne for mi fader hiere,
That after this, whan men it hiere,
The world therof mai speke good. (l.3315–21)

Her final words remind him that both the fulfilment of his monarchical 'office' and his reputation are at stake, bringing the lesson about humility to bear on his

⁵⁵ Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic*, p. 144.

⁵⁶ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. *kep* (n.), def. 1a.

⁵⁷ Bullón-Fernández, *Fathers and Daughters in John Gower's Confessio Amantis*, pp. 72–73. On the Marian elements, see also Gallacher, *Love, the Word, and Mercury*, pp. 37–40; and Donavin, *Incest Narratives and the Structure of Gower's Confessio Amantis*, pp. 56–57.

behaviours. Of course, since Alphonse set the riddles, he has long known the moral content that they express, but he has lacked the will or pressure to follow morality until Peronelle confronts him. Pride drove him to challenge Petro; now Peronelle argues that to gain fame, he must subdue that pride. This strange paradox echoes one common to mirrors for princes texts: to get what he most desires, the lord must actively suppress his desires for it.⁵⁸ As in Florent's final choice, Alphonse must enact the lady's lesson instead. By submitting his will to her advice, Alphonse stands to gain more fame than if he were to continue in his desire to punish Petro.

However, simply accepting Peronelle's answers does not constitute a sufficient demonstration of humility, and Gower pushes Peronelle to even bolder actions that force Alphonse into a (briefly) humble role. While negotiating rewards for her father and herself, Peronelle kneels, assuming a physically submissive stance and recognized intercessory pose that she has not yet occupied during her time at court (I.3346). After Alphonse grants land for Petro that elevates her to marriageable status, Gower draws attention to her physical placement 'on hire knes | Tofore the king' (I.3359–60). Kneeling was notably absent when she answered the riddles earlier; when she becomes more daring in her speech, her bodily display of submission tempers the assertive request that might otherwise call into question the king's authority:

Mi liege lord, riht now tofore
 Ye seide, as it is of record,
 That if my fader were a lord
 And pier unto these othre grete,
 Ye wolden for noght elles lete
 That I ne scholde be your wif;
 And this wot every worthi lif,
 A kinges word it mot ben holde. (I.3362–69)

Her physical shift to her knees conveys her humility and evokes the queenly intercessor, which is essentially what she wants to become. She rightly observes that the king should keep his promise now that she meets his conditions for marriage, but her words may also be read as an audacious insistence that he marry her. Of course, he can hardly refuse her without risking the open contradiction of both his riddles and his promise, so he must humbly accept. Peronelle initially models humility for Alphonse, but she then abandons it when she negotiates her marriage, allowing him to claim the humbled position.

⁵⁸ Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority and Power*, p. 215, identifies this paradox as central to the *Melibee's* reform of a rash young lord.

The defining moment of the tale occurs when Alphonse submits to Peronelle's marriage request, simultaneously enacting humility and reconfirming his authority over his future wife. Although it is possible to believe that she tricks him into an inescapable marriage, if he possesses the wisdom Genius attributed to him (1.3067), then it is plausible that Alphonse recognizes the position he puts himself into when he mentions that marriage depends upon her father's rank and then offers Peronelle any worldly gift. Their negotiation gives him the opportunity to perform humility, knowing (or hoping) that ceding power will result in what he desires: increased reputation and marriage to a clever, attractive woman. Even if he accepts Peronelle out of a self-interested desire for reputation or a good match, his choice has more far-ranging benefits, including demonstrating his rejection of pride. The marriage also reconciles Petro to Alphonse, bringing the tale full-circle in a way *Florent* does not by resolving the animosities that sparked the major conflict; all three characters share in the happy ending. Only at the end of the tale does Genius announce that Alphonse earns a reputation in the chronicles as a 'noble king' — a measurable difference from the king of the beginning whose pride causes discord with his smartest knight. The wedding also places Peronelle in a relationship to Alphonse that readers could easily understand: his wife. By making her queen at the end of the tale, Gower aligns her with the representations of historical queens such as Philippa and Anne who gained reputations for pleading to the king or other lords. They provide a way for Gower to authorize a fictional woman whose 'wifely eloquence' and knowledge make her a perfect adviser without challenging gender and status hierarchies.

Therefore, although Gower establishes an authoritative position for Peronelle, he does not ultimately subvert gender hierarchies. When she advises her father, he maintains a clear division of power by depicting her as kneeling subordinate. When Petro allows her to speak for him at court, she moves outside his control, placing her in a potentially unsettling relationship to gender hierarchies. Because women were so often 'covered' by their fathers or husbands, historical documents rarely record women exercising power. Femaleness was defined by submissiveness to males, and only in the absence of a male authority figure, such as a husband or father, did women exercise public roles.⁵⁹ Peronelle has the least status in the family, and in theory, she should be subordinate to her father. However, the tale shows that patriarchal structure may be more flexible in dire circumstances, as Peronelle

⁵⁹ Bennett, 'Public Power and Authority in the Medieval English Countryside', pp. 18–36; Fowler, *Literary Character*, pp. 106–11.

creates what María Bullón-Fernández has called a 'space for subversion'.⁶⁰ Indeed, Gower imagines subversive possibilities: first, that a woman's actions could determine the future for herself and an associated male (her father, then Alphonse), and second, that Peronelle publicly exercises authority in answering the king's questions. Yet Peronelle's marriage smoothes over the potentially unsettling moment when a non-aristocratic woman with no relation to the king dares to articulate his flaw of pride. Her 'bold' negotiation of marriage ultimately restores the *status quo* and returns her to a position understood as submissive to the king's authority. Gower thus depicts an essential modification to the political system through a wise woman's intervention, without undermining traditional hierarchies.

While medieval society viewed marriage as an indicator of the king's maturity that increased his royal authority, this particular marriage plays a key role in Alphonse's reform and increased reputation.⁶¹ Peronelle's counsel directly affects the way that he governs, urging a fusion of self-interest and common profit instead of the illogical division of the two represented by his earlier rejection of Petro's wisdom as competition. Gower shows that Alphonse needed this experience with Peronelle to enrich his authority on multiple levels. As he illustrates elsewhere, including the tale just preceding *Three Questions*, a good king should embrace humility and be allowed to change his mind (e.g., *Nebuchadnezzar's Punishment*, I.3005–21, *Constantine and Sylvester*, II.3280–94). The distinguishing factor is that the various successes in *Three Questions* all hinge on Peronelle's effective counsel. By transferring Peronelle from her father to the king, Gower reassigns her wisdom from the domestic sphere to the political sphere represented by the king and court. He therefore asserts that women form part of the ideal polity, and their advice should be heard. Alphonse's marriage repositions him in the authoritative position of husband, but it also unites him to his wise counsellor and results in the improvement of his reputation and kingdom. Paradoxically, Peronelle's temporary destabilization of patriarchal and social hierarchies enables the stabilization of the political system.⁶²

The *Three Questions* offers readers three possible exemplars that reflect different status positions in the process of advising a king, a typically masculine enterprise that is here only effective because of a female character. Alphonse exemplifies

⁶⁰ Bullón-Fernández, *Fathers and Daughters in John Gower's Confessio Amantis*, p. 73.

⁶¹ On the king's marriage in medieval England, see Laynesmith, *The Last Medieval Queens*, pp. 29–30.

⁶² See Bullón-Fernández, *Fathers and Daughters in John Gower's Confessio Amantis*, pp. 66–67, for a complementary assessment of how the transference of Peronelle from her father to the king restores order.

the king who possesses wisdom but does not act according to what he knows to be moral truths. His reformation instructs Gower's readers to view counsel as beneficial and to perform the virtues they learn, a valuable lesson early in a lengthy book of advice. Petro exemplifies humility and a positive feminization: he takes a feminized position by letting his daughter act as his proxy, which demonstrates not effeminacy but rather humility and wisdom. Peronelle's intercession allows him to avoid the troublesome consequences of personally responding to the king's problematic questions and skilfully circumvents Alphonse's view of wise men as threats to his status. She may not have an exclusively intellectual advantage over her father, but she certainly can more safely point out the king's fallibility. The tale becomes an exemplum of how a counsellor can avoid a king's potentially negative reaction by adopting a humble, 'feminized' persona in order to advise without threat, and, alternately, how rulers ought to accept counsel as well-intentioned and not threatening to their authority.

Peronelle rightfully receives the bulk of Genius's attention, marking her as the primary exemplar, despite her gender and the constructed male audience of the *Confessio* (even though there were, of course, women readers who could also benefit from her example). But as so often occurs, Genius's framework cannot completely be trusted: his implied assurances that the tale does not subvert the gendered hierarchy of masculine superiority disguises Gower's reimagination of the counselling relationship as a marital partnership. Genius first anticipates the tale's culmination in marriage by warning Amans that to lead an honest life, 'Thou most humblesce take on honde' (l.3047), an image that evokes the marriage ceremony. Like the Latin gloss to *Florent*, his opening remark foreshadows that any potentially subversive elements will be contained, that is, that the humble daughter who emerges from her father's control will be integrated back into the established hierarchy.⁶³ Although Gower raises issues of women's empowerment through counsel, he only briefly imagines any measure of autonomous authority for women, since he finally integrates them back into the patriarchal system through marriage.

Genius's conclusion creates another marriage metaphor that interprets Alphonse's decision as one to love and marry Humility and leave Pride: 'if thou wolt love, | It sit thee wel to leve Pride | And take Humblesce upon thi side' (l.3422–24). His allegoresis makes Peronelle the embodiment of 'Humblesce'

⁶³ The fact that Peronelle becomes Alphonse's wife also avoids the subversive idea that *any* woman could fill the role of political adviser. Neither Peronelle nor the hag stands for an 'everywoman'; both eventually become royal women authorized by the historical expectation of queenly intercession.

and glosses over her challenges to patriarchal norms, but it oversimplifies Gower's detailed narrative. Peronelle actively counsels the king toward the beneficial action of suppressing pride, and her bold assertiveness contradicts the consistency expected of personifications. Peronelle cannot *be* Humility personified, moreover, because the narrative events subject her to her society's assumptions about women's supposed inferiority. Gower plays with the relationship between the literal and abstract, and he demonstrates that the exemplum allows both to coexist productively. Peronelle exemplifies an effective and assertive way to undercut the king's pride but only because society's assumptions about her gender allow her to be seen as submissive and humble. She becomes not only a potential model for those who share her literal gender but also the central element of a lesson to masculine readers that a feminine persona and its attendant humility and 'powerlessness' can paradoxically be more effective than a masculine one.

This lesson holds true not only for counsellors to kings but also for counseling poets, as Gower's own literary practice demonstrates. If a fictional narrative can protect the poet who wished to address sensitive political topics, then speaking through a woman character constitutes a second, additional layer of protection.⁶⁴ Gower, like Petro, speaks through Peronelle as a safety mechanism and as a means to meditate on the role of the poet as an adviser to princes.⁶⁵ Peronelle's performance illustrates the very combination of deference and challenge that is integral to mirrors for princes, a combination that I term 'submissive but active'. The paradoxical phrase joins two words that accurately describe her participation in political matters. Gower underscores her humility and powerlessness as key traits that facilitate her counsel to a wilful young monarch. She is submissive in that she does not subvert gender norms, for she counsels only with the permission of her father and the king, but she is nevertheless active because she dynamically offers advice from an authoritative position. Gower's deployment of women indicates one way that he perceives the mode of counsel in mirrors for princes to work — by subordination of the author of advice, with the implication that authority can be gained safely through displays of deference. In his politics of counsel, a woman or a 'feminine' invocation of powerlessness actually empowers the royal counsellor.

⁶⁴ Green, *Poets and Princepleasers*, pp. 135–67, addresses the *Confessio* specifically as an example of the more general way that fictional narratives provide screens for poet's political commentary.

⁶⁵ Nolan, *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture*, pp. 226–28, makes a similar case for Gower's admiration of the plain speech of the Romans in the *Roman Emperors* (vii.2355–2411). For the multiple 'authorial' voices in the *Confessio*, see Watt, *Amoral Gower*, pp. 153–56.

Importantly, neither the feminized counsellor nor the aristocrat who heeds her advice is depicted negatively. Instead of categorizing all male qualities as dominant and all female qualities as submissive and powerless, Gower reveals that 'feminine' qualities and knowledge provide a necessary supplement to a masculine persona, a balancing act sometimes (but not always) figured through marriage. In other exempla, he asserts that even manly men like Achilles may acceptably act 'womanly' when it suits them, so long as their association with womanly qualities does not amount to the rejection of kingship and masculinity — as it does in the case of Sardanapalus, the king who leaves court to learn womanly behaviour, and in Amans's melodramatic submissions to love.⁶⁶ Yet even negative examples like Sardanapalus are not bad because of an association with women *per se* but rather for the exemplar's inability to accommodate both masculine and feminine traits in a sustained balance. Gower takes the features of each gender in aggregate, suggesting that characteristics stereotypically considered 'masculine' or 'feminine' must complement each other and work together in the ethical ruler, as they must in the ideal marriage. This balance is obtained, he shows in *Florent* and *Three Questions*, through the crucial act of counsel.

A New Vision of the Polity

In both *Florent* and *Three Questions*, Gower imagines a broad role for women of any relation, or no relation, to the man advised. Peronelle and the hag/princess derive their authority as valid counsellors not from any status as queen or aristocrat, but from being *women* first. In constructing the woman counsellor, Gower plays with what he knows to be his readers' stereotypes about women as powerless, only to reverse those expectations. He certainly demonstrates familiarity with this stereotype in tales that portray abused women, such as Calistona, Lucrece, and Canace. These distraught victims seem the antithesis of the more authoritative women, but they are important to Gower's construction of assertive women's power. He endorses the image of these women as powerless except as catalysts for pity who encourage characters (and readers) to embrace their own human pity as motivation for action. For example, Lucrece's distressed suicide clarifies the contemptuous effects of a ruler's corruption and triggers his deposition (VII.4754–5123), and Gower criticizes Canace's father Eolus for 'his horrible cruauté | Ther mihte attempre no pité' (III.143–336, at ll. 235–36). Such moments reinforce the stereotypical view of women as powerless and pitiable,

⁶⁶ Williams, *The Invention of Womanhood*, pp. 65–72.

the very conception on which female counsellors paradoxically rely when they intervene in male affairs. Thus, even apparent victims have a role in producing proper governance.

Gower foregrounds both pity and counsel as equally necessary for the ideal king, and he aligns them through the concept of pity as a 'feminine' quality and through women's capacity to evoke pity. In Book VII, soon after claiming that counsel forms the substance of a king's authority to govern, he praises instead pity as the basis of every king's rule (VII.3889, 4196). While these statements seem to be at odds, when taken in aggregate, they assert that both concepts are the foundations of proper governance. Women are conspicuously absent from this portion of Book VII, but that does not undermine their association with pity or counsel. As James Simpson has persuasively demonstrated, Gower produces a tightly planned structure in which Book VII supplements and illuminates other books' content so that the entire *Confessio* provides full coverage of politics, ethics, and economics.⁶⁷ A similar strategy applies to his distribution of views on women. Having previously established women as pitiable, Gower uses Book VII to strengthen the connection between pity and counsel in order to reinforce the notion that women, because they inspire pity, become useful counsellors. In other words, if women specially exemplify and evoke pity in a way that man cannot access, and if pity is a *sine qua non* of the Christian ruler, then women's counsel must be considered essential to good rule, at least in a society that possesses this stereotype about women. While I do not mean to claim that the existence of this stereotype endorses women's counsel in the historical realm, in the *Confessio*, the stereotype facilitates the association of good counsel with women. Because this stereotype exists, Gower can deploy women counsellors so that he, Gower, can offer challenging advice to a powerful man without threatening the recipient's authority. And in situations where power is distributed unevenly, he asserts that a feminized persona paradoxically grants greater authority and security to the counsellor. Through women counsellors and the exemplary men they instruct, Gower constructs ideal roles for both the counsellor and the recipient of counsel.

Tellingly, the Princess of Cizile and Peronelle succeed where men have failed, calling attention to gender as a significant component of their successes. It is unlikely that the traditionally conservative Gower wished to call for a shift in the gender hierarchy. Instead he transforms the dominant metaphor for the polity by envisioning king-counsellor relations as analogous to marriages, as mutually beneficial relationships with a feminine yet rational voice to balance masculine author-

⁶⁷ Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry*, pp. 221–23.

ity.⁶⁸ Using a marriage metaphor solves the problem of power struggles inherent to the mirrors for princes genre in which the king must submit to advice but not relinquish authority, while the counsellor must assume a morally and intellectually authoritative position without diminishing royal authority. Through counsel, traditional hierarchies are momentarily disregarded, as the aristocrat lowers himself to receive it and the adviser is elevated, but the marriage model protects the hierarchy. Because of cultural assumptions about gender, Gower's audience would perceive that the king-husband wields authority, which allows Gower to demonstrate the importance of an assertive yet humble counsellor-wife to the benefit of the realm (and couple). The marriage metaphor therefore resolves the perennial question of what *fin amors* and Gower's mirror for princes have in common: at the most basic level, Gower's model husband and model prince share the same virtues. By joining the two seemingly exclusive themes of love and politics, Gower urges his readers to evaluate the degrees to which ethical politics and the ordered marriage fundamentally require similar qualities.

This notion of the ideal kingdom stands in stark contrast to the image of the polity as a body with an autocratic head controlling (or attempting to control) the other members. Gower acknowledges the traditional view of the body politic in the Prologue, but he calls into question its application in the current age. He depicts first an ideal version: 'membres buxom' support the head, and the head welcomes those members and 'her trowthe allowe' because 'good consail is good to hie' (Prol., 151–56). The description implies both the head's acceptance of their loyalty and of their true counsel.⁶⁹ His image represents a reciprocal, working relationship that is soon supplanted by the dysfunctional division that occupies his interest in the remainder of the Prologue, which culminates in the monstrously divided statue of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. In addition to the statue's

⁶⁸ As a qualifier, this model does not endure beyond the late fourteenth century; I suspect that it depends in part on the royal couples, since the marriages of Edward III to Philippa and Richard II to Anne were notable for their mutual affection and the occurrence of queenly intercession to temper the king's impulses. After the Lancastrian rise to power, there are fewer instances of queenly intercession, both historically and literarily; indeed, by the mid-fifteenth century, Margaret of Anjou for the most part controlled the Lancastrian faction in the Wars of the Roses, providing a more publicly authoritative image of queenship. Margaret seems to be the exception that suggests that the role of mediator can extend into public authority. See Maurer, *Margaret of Anjou*, pp. 52–66; and Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship*, pp. 326–31, 348–54.

⁶⁹ The accompanying Latin marginal gloss, 'Solomon. Omnia fac cum consilio' (Solomon: Do all things with counsel), further supports reading the relationship described as one of counsel.

representation of the Ages of Man and the decline of the world, scholars have also interpreted the statue as illustrating psychological decay and the 'disintegrative progress of sin', and as an image for Fortune's effect on the world.⁷⁰ Gower depicted a similar statue in the *Vox Clamantis* to indicate the disordered body politic (*Vox*, VII.1375–79), and the *Confessio* statue may likewise be read as indicative of the divisions inherent to that very image of head and body for king and subjects. The statue warns of impending destruction through Daniel's discussion of the implicit and explicit divisions that caused the failures of prior realms (Prol., 663–880). Yet Gower also asserts that 'the man is overal | His oghne cause of wel and wo' (Prol., 546–47), and 'The man is cause of alle wo, | Why this world is divided so' (Prol., 965–66). If man is responsible for the state of the world, then he may amend it, and coupled with these statements, the depiction of Nebuchadnezzar's statue urges penitence and reform.⁷¹ At the Prologue's conclusion, Gower calls for a new Arion to sing the realm into cohesion like the mythical musician did. As if responding to the Prologue's appeal for the resolution of divisions, *Florent* and *Three Questions* deliver hope for new models to replace the divisive body politic. Feminized counsel becomes the antidote for a prideful ruler, and, in particular, by signalling the benefits to the king and kingdom that accrue because of Peronelle's counsel, Gower constructs his marriage metaphor as an alternative to the vision of the polity as members in competition with one another.

Gower's uses of the female counsellor and marriage metaphor constitute an important example of the healing powers of counsel. Of course, women counsellors need not be the only means through which he imagines the ideal king, counsellor, or realm (and, indeed, Gower explores other counsellor options in Daniel, Arion, and the Fool). After all, each book of the *Confessio* possesses its own distinct structure so that each requires a different interpretive response.⁷² In Book I, women counsellors are the distinguishing component of Gower's attempts to counter pride, and the marriage metaphor reframes the counsellor-advisee relationship as one that should be mutually beneficial. This perspective constructs counsel as 'safe' for all involved, and it is also remarkable for the suggestion that a feminine, 'powerless' role can be an enabling position

⁷⁰ Respectively, see Peck, 'John Gower and the Book of Daniel', p. 160; and Fredell, 'Reading the Dream Miniature', p. 65. On the image in the *Vox Clamantis*, see Salisbury, 'Remembering Origins: Gower's Monstrous Body Poetic', pp. 172–74.

⁷¹ Peck, 'John Gower and the Book of Daniel', pp. 171–77; and Yeager, 'The Body Politic and the Politics of Bodies', pp. 158–64.

⁷² Nicholson, *Love and Ethics in Gower's Confessio Amantis*, pp. 75–77; see also Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry*, pp. 221–23.

for a counsellor. Pairing the rejection of pride with the emphasis on enacting virtues, the first book offers a hermeneutic for engaging advice that prepares readers to make the best use of Gower's work by heeding, remembering, and applying its counsel. As a mirror for princes, the *Confessio's* project vernacularizes authoritative counsel from Latin texts and genres in order to cultivate ethical sensibilities in his English audiences.⁷³ Gower's evidence that women may often be more effective counsellors than men equally conveys the argument that even though his 'feminine' text does not carry the same immediate authority as its paternal Latin predecessors, the *Confessio's* vernacular advice can nevertheless be fundamental in encouraging English audiences to embrace moral virtues.

⁷³ Mitchell, *Ethics and Eventfulness in Middle English Literature*, pp. 71–77, argues that Gower constructs a 'vernacular ethics', a system that endeavours to instruct his readers in ethical processes. See also McCabe, *Gower's Vulgar Tongue*, pp. 6–9, 129–30, on Gower's vernacularization of Latin content.

‘LERNE THIS AT ME!’
ALCESTE AS A MODEL FOR THE POET
IN THE *LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN*

[...] Lat be thyn arguyng,
For Love ne wol nat counterpletyd be
In ryght ne wrong; and lerne this at me!
Thow hast thy grace, and hold the ryght therto. (ll. 465–68)¹

The moment in the *Legend of Good Women* when Alceste silences the kneeling poet has been recognized as a problematic scene. By this point in the *Prologue*, she has skilfully rescued the hapless narrator from Cupid’s ire and the poet’s trial is effectively over: Cupid has agreed not to hold the narrator Geoffrey liable for representations of women that Cupid interpreted as treasonous, heretical, or designed to discourage readers from following his laws. After thanking Alceste for her efforts, Geoffrey explains that his *entente* was to ‘forthere trouthe in love and it cheryce, | And to be war fro falsnesse and fro vice’ (ll. 462–63). This potential reopening of a settled case warrants Alceste’s sharp interruption and the above reprimand that has struck many readers as inconsistent with her otherwise magnanimous behaviour as an intercessor and political counsellor.²

¹ All citations are from Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Benson, and refer to the *G Prologue* unless otherwise noted. I adopt the distinction that other scholars use to distinguish the *Canterbury Tales* narrator Geoffrey from the author Chaucer in the *Prologue*; in the legends, the distance between the two figures is less extreme.

² Spearing, *Medieval Dream Poetry*, p. 106, asserts that she has ‘fiercely rebuked’ the undeserving poet. Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, pp. 70–72, views her as at best an ambivalent and inconsistent figure whom Chaucer uses to authorize a ‘masculinist fantasy’ of passive women; Delany, *The Naked Text*, pp. 107–14, questions Alceste’s aggression and

However, in terms of exemplarity and understanding the fragile process of advising and re-education through which Alceste urges Cupid to conform to the proper behaviour of a merciful, good king, this outburst is the defining moment for Geoffrey's understanding of Alceste as an exemplar for his own practice in addressing political topics safely. The most important element of this scene is not that Alceste interrupts the poet but *why*, which has been understood as based in the desire to control his poetic production or silence the poetic will.³ Alceste is not insensitive to the poet's predicament, as her intercession with Cupid clearly demonstrates, but this second, more scolding intervention is required to secure the poet's safety. She characterizes Cupid as difficult: right or wrong, he refuses to be 'counterpleted', a legal term for contradiction.⁴ Yet in securing clemency for Geoffrey, she has done all *but* contradict Cupid in her careful representation of Geoffrey as blameless for his poetry and of Cupid as a clearly superior sovereign whose noble status requires him to be merciful. When she announces, 'lerne this at me', she does not simply indicate her awareness of Cupid's incorrigible qualities; instead, she means, 'learn *from* me' that one cannot directly argue against him successfully.⁵ She emphasizes that her careful argumentation should instruct Geoffrey how to negotiate with a powerful man without explicit challenges to that man's authority. Within the narrative context, Geoffrey's ill-advised speech jarringly contradicts Cupid's views and thus threatens to reignite his ire and undo Alceste's successful negotiations. And rather than suppressing Geoffrey's voice or invalidating his *entente*, Alceste next offers him the opportunity to continue writing by defining his future poetic task:

Thow shalt, whil that thow livest, yer by yere,
 The moste partye of thy tyme spende
 In makynge of a glorious legende
 Of goode women, maydenes and wyves,
 That were trewe in lovyng al here lyves
 And telle of false men that hem betrayen... (ll. 471–76)

interprets her actions as inevitably resulting in legends that undermine pro-women positions. Taylor, 'Anne of Bohemia and the Making of Chaucer', pp. 108–09, distrusts her defence of the poet and aligns her with Cupid's reductive readings.

³ I think it fair to attribute these desires to Cupid, but not to Alceste. On Alceste as complicit in forcing the poet to produce a totalizing vision, see Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, pp. 70–72; and on her participation in Cupid's silencing of the poetic will, see Simpson, 'Ethics and Interpretation: Reading Wills', pp. 80–93.

⁴ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. *pleten* (v.), def. 1; s.v. *countre* (prep.), def. 2. See also Simpson, 'Ethics and Interpretation: Reading Wills', p. 81.

⁵ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. *at* (prep.), def. 2b.

Because Geoffrey is armed now with Alceste's model strategies for circumventing Cupid's wilful readings, this assignment is less restrictive than it initially appears and, as the latter portions of this chapter will show, Alceste actually enables poetic freedom under the guise of controlling it. She does not expect the poet to conform to the palinode's limitations but instead anticipates that he will heed her example and use his commission to address the more pertinent issues of self-control and political wisdom that caused Cupid's ire to rage in the first place.

Encapsulated within the *Prologue's* debates about gender, authority, and experience, then, is a clear lesson about the nature of counselling a monarch. We have seen that Gower as the author of an advice text subtly identifies with the women counsellors he depicts, and a similar authorial identification becomes evident in the *Legend*, as Chaucer addresses love's tyranny and the appropriate governance of rulers first through Alceste and then through the composition that she has authorized. What sets the *Legend* apart from other courtly poetry like Guillaume de Machaut's 'Judgement' poems, which combine *de regimine* material with gender debate, is that instead of defining masculinity and femininity against each other, Chaucer shows how the identification with the feminine transforms the male poet.⁶ Geoffrey initially exhibits a feminized powerlessness before both poetic authorities and Cupid, but all this changes after he sees Alceste use apparent submission to enable her to authoritatively counsel Cupid to reform. She exemplifies not only the necessity of subordinating oneself to a superior but also the paradoxical freedom that comes from embracing a feminized, seemingly powerless position. By following her feminized model, Geoffrey begins to incorporate similar strategies in his interaction with Cupid and in his construction of the legends in order to establish himself as an authoritative poet and political counsellor. Through the *Prologue* and legends, Chaucer challenges preconceived notions that 'acting like a woman' would endanger masculine authority and instead portrays feminization as an advantageous subject position for the poet who wishes to offer social and political critique.⁷ The positive representation of Alceste as Cupid's

⁶ Guillaume de Machaut, *Le Jugement du roy de Behaigne*, ed. and trans. by Wimsatt and Kibler, and Guillaume de Machaut, *The Judgment of the King of Navarre*, ed. and trans. by Palmer, stage gender debates in order to evidence the judge's (the king's) ideal qualities as he listens to narratives that pit women's fidelity and strength in love against men's. On their influence on Chaucer, see Palmer, 'Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*', pp. 183–94; Calin, *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England*, pp. 287–301, and Calin, 'Machaut's Legacy', pp. 29–46; and Wimsatt, *Chaucer and His French Contemporaries*, pp. 161–68.

⁷ Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, pp. 26–38 and 133–38, has argued persuasively that feminization constitutes Chaucer's ideal for kings, including Cupid, because kings must act

counsellor and the aspects of the legends that undermine stereotypical assumptions about gender collectively defend the feminized perspective of the counsellor as essential to good governance.

The Prologue's Lessons in Exemplary Kingship and Feminized Counsel

The central issue of the *Prologue* is authority in various forms — bookish authority versus experience, the uneven dynamics between patron and poet and between ruler and counsellor, and masculine authority versus the expected feminine lack thereof. In each case, the exemplum becomes Chaucer's means of challenging the dichotomy that would seem to be established by these binaries. In the first instance, although Geoffrey sides with bookish authority, his activities in the meadow demonstrate how courtly readings of marguerite poetry have influenced his behaviour. Through his narrator's attempts to emulate daisy-worshippers and popular poets, Chaucer introduces the notion that literary texts do not simply record experience or authoritative knowledge, but rather that even courtly poetry creates exemplars for courtiers, lovers, and poets, and thereby sets standards for their experiences. Geoffrey follows the prescribed steps to praise the daisy, but his dramatic lament that he cannot match his predecessors evidences his perceived failure to replicate their experiences and their celebrated poetry.⁸ Rather than adhere to the dichotomy of experience and authority, Chaucer shows that in practice the two elements can be intertwined in a considerably more complex relationship: experiences can produce authority, but authoritative texts can also construct expectations for readers' experiences and behaviours. Geoffrey's impulse to follow a literary model and weigh himself against it underscores important theoretical points for the work as a whole, as the *Prologue* attunes the reader, through Geoffrey, to the strategies of the exemplum that will later undergird the legends' presentation of classical characters as exemplars. Importantly, these strategies facilitate the combination of feminized deference and authoritative assertiveness that in turn enable the advising of a superior.

When Geoffrey enters his dream vision trial, Alceste's successful defence provides him both the experience of witnessing an effective counsellor and the

with the pity, patience, and mercy often associated with women. For the opposing view that feminization is damaging to masculinity, see Hansen, 'The Feminization of Men in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*', and Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, pp. 1–10.

⁸ Staley, *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II*, pp. 56–59, aligns this perceived incompetence with the poet's later inability to articulate himself before Cupid.

authoritative 'text' to structure his development from silent bystander to social critic. Cupid's threat, 'Thow shalt repente it, so that it shal be sene!' (l. 316), seeks to make an example of Geoffrey to warn others to avoid the mistakes Cupid finds in his poetry: speaking ill of women, discouraging readers from serving Cupid, and therefore committing a form of both treason and heresy (ll. 246–67).⁹ Geoffrey's escape from this predicament comes through Alceste's mediation, and he dramatically claims that he otherwise would have been dead, 'withouten any defence' (l. 182), a phrase that indicates both 'certainly' and without a legal defence.¹⁰ He introduces Alceste first seemingly as a queenly intercessor, but she gradually exceeds the petitionary, limited role typically associated with such intercessions; she goes significantly beyond addressing only the defence of Geoffrey that warrants her intervention, and she never prostrates herself as Anne and Philippa commonly did while they entreated their husbands to exercise pity or mercy.¹¹ Rather, she asserts the necessity that a proper sovereign must allow Geoffrey to 'replye' to charges 'meved' against him (ll. 319–20), using terms that have distinctly legal resonances related to pleading cases and hearing counsel.¹² She continues to advise that,

A god ne sholde not thus been agreved
 But of his deite he shal be stable,
 And thereto ryghtful, and ek mercyable.
 He shal nat ryghtfully his yre wreke
 Or he have herd the tother partye speke. (ll. 321–25)

⁹ Cupid objects that Geoffrey 'me werreyest' (l. 248), a martial offence, and commits 'an heresy ageyns my lawe' (l. 256), blurring the lines between his status as ruler and deity, as Alceste also does in her speeches.

¹⁰ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. *defense* (n.), defs 3 (d), 4, 6 (b). Chaucer employs the same language in *Boece* when he translates the prisoner's complaint that he has been denied a trial: 'I am withoute deffense dampnyd to proscriptioun and to the deth' (I, pr. 4, l. 242).

¹¹ Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, pp. 99–119, establishes intercession as a fundamentally supplicatory role that includes kneeling or prostration and provides the foundational reading of Alceste as a more assertive intercessor when compared to historical queens' intercessions. She is also more forceful than other Chaucerian intercessors, such as when Griselda submits to Walter in the *Clerk's Tale*, ll. 289–94; when the widows beseech Theseus in the *Knight's Tale*, l. 949; and when Queen Hippolyta and Emelye persuade Theseus to spare Palamon and Arcite in the *Knight's Tale*, ll. 1757–61. See also Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, pp. 354–78.

¹² Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. *meven* (v.), defs 6b(c); s.v. *replien* (v.), def. 2(e).

This counsel is recognizably political in nature. As Helen Phillips has shown, *ryghtful* was the English equivalent of *justicia*, and the pairing of justice and mercy recalls the coronation oath and prominent medieval theories of kingship. The occurrence of 'ryghtful', 'mercyable', and 'yre' together produces a reading of *yre* as 'virtually a technical term from the register of political science', since political writers from Seneca to Gower have emphasized mercy as tempering *yre*.¹³ The content and word choices elevate both the conflict and Alceste's intervention to a more official, juridical level than a disagreement between poet and patron or a queen's petitionary intercession.¹⁴ Although she has reminded many critics of Anne of Bohemia and queenly intercession, Alceste cannot be definitively aligned with the queen or Cupid's spouse because she embodies a broader ideal: a feminized counsellor who exploits the cultural concept of a royal woman's intercession to safely advise Cupid on kingship.¹⁵

While Alceste may evoke queenly intercession for Chaucer's audiences, within the fiction, her authority derives from classical narrative: Alceste was a queen who volunteered to die so that her husband the king Admetus might live. Her intense devotion to her spouse qualifies her as Cupid's ideal of wifedom and the 'calandier' (model) of 'fyn lovyng' (ll. 533–35). This status further distances her from queenly intercession with a husband, for if her authority draws on her devotion to Admetus, she cannot also be Cupid's wife without violating the very principle on which her authority is based. In other words, her qualifications to

¹³ Phillips, 'Register, Politics, and the *Legend of Good Women*', pp. 117–18. On the political content of this section, see also Percival, *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women*, pp. 120–24; Burnley, *Chaucer's Language and the Philosophers' Tradition*, pp. 11–19; and Schlauch, 'Chaucer's Doctrine of Kings and Tyrants', pp. 150–54.

¹⁴ Guillaume de Machaut, *The Judgment of the King of Navarre*, ed. and trans. by Palmer also provides precedent for reading this conflict as a trial, although that context is more playful: it lacks the threat of capital punishment and the king himself insists upon a proper trial, rather than needing an Alceste figure to encourage due process.

¹⁵ Alceste's directive in F that the poet should send his composition to the queen 'on my byhalf' (not, 'to me') at Anne's favourite royal residences troubles any easy correlation between Alceste and Anne (F, ll. 496–97). Additionally, the corresponding representation of Richard as Cupid would be unflattering and potentially unwise. For the perspective that Cupid and Alceste at least implicitly figure Richard and Anne, see Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, pp. 337–78; and Staley, *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II*, pp. 19–25. Of course, royal woman did not always intercede only with their husbands, as demonstrated in Anne's attempt to save Simon Burley and in Joan of Kent's mediations with her son Richard II and John of Gaunt; see *The Westminster Chronicle*, ed. and trans. by Hector and Harvey, pp. 330–31; *The St Albans Chronicle*, ed. and trans. by Taylor, Childs, and Watkiss, pp. 750–51. See also, above, pp. 42–43.

negotiate with Cupid must come from something other than a marital relationship between king and counsellor, such as her experiences and rhetorical skills. By recalling her former position as queen, Chaucer points to her political experience and her authority to speak on kingship.¹⁶ Additionally, her devotion to Admetus unites the court of love with politics: more than simply a display of *amor*, her self-sacrifice can also be interpreted as producing a political good, because the result preserves her husband's rule and the stability of their kingdom. Her experiences offer diverse and resounding reasons why Cupid and the audience should trust her equally as an authority on topics of love and kingship.

Alceste provides the necessary mediating voice between these two men of unequal social status through her 'submissive but active' discourse. Her ability to correct Cupid without contradicting him or challenging his rule allows her — and later Geoffrey — to maintain a third kind of authority, the authority to speak and counsel. Chaucer essentially ventriloquizes 'his own' defence through Alceste's speeches, and she, not Geoffrey, addresses topics relevant during Richard II's reign such as counsel, wilfulness, and tyranny. These topics associate the *Prologue* loosely as *de regimine* material designed to highlight virtues that Cupid and outside readers would be wise to adopt.¹⁷ In depicting Alceste's attempts to mitigate Cupid's wrath, Chaucer works through the strategies available to those who wished to negotiate with a wilful, wrathful monarch.

Crucially, Alceste relies not only on the topics central to mirrors for princes but also the genre's underlying principles of exemplarity, which frame her attempts to counsel Cupid to reform. When she warns him that a god must be 'stable', 'ryghtful', and 'merciable', she creates an ideal for him to emulate. As her speech continues, 'god' and 'king' become interchangeable, indicating Chaucer's investment in exemplarity as a means to counsel a ruler:

This [Geoffrey's defence] shulde a ryghtwys lord han in his thought,
And not ben lyk tyraunts of Lumbardy,
That usen wilfulhed and tyrannye.
For he that kyng or lord is naturel,
Hym oughthe nat be tyraunt and crewel
As is a fermour, to don the harm he can.

tax collector

¹⁶ Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, p. 115.

¹⁷ See Schlauch, 'Chaucer's Doctrine of Kings and Tyrants', pp. 150–53; Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, pp. 111–19; Simpson, 'Ethics and Interpretation: Reading Wills', pp. 82–84; and Percival, *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women*, pp. 96–97, 113–29. For historical concerns with Richard's behaviour, see also Saul, 'Richard II and the Vocabulary of Kingship', and Saul, *Richard II*, pp. 148–204, 339–41.

He moste thynke it is his lige man,
 And that hym oweth, of verray duetee,
 Shewen his peple pleyn benygnete,
 And wel to heren here excusacyouns,
 And here compleyntes and petyciouns,
 In duewe tyme, whan they shal it profre. (ll. 353–64)

In this passage, politically-charged language abounds as Alceste contrasts the good king with the tyrant: *tyraunts of Lombardy, wilfulhed, tyrannye, kyng or lord [...] naturel, tyraunt, crewel, excusacyouns, compleyntes, petyciouns*.¹⁸ The specific reference to Lombardy is important, for it signifies the unchecked dominance of masculine authority exemplified by Lombard rulers, and these lines express fear of the violence that may come of such tyranny.¹⁹ Further, Alceste exemplifies the deeds of good and bad rulers by privileging active verbs: kings *usen* tyranny or *shewen* benevolence rather than *being* overbearing or benevolent. When she does mention being ‘tyraunt and crewel’, she includes the illustrative example of the *fermour*. This term for a tax collector is not itself pejorative, but the job required one to force people to pay and ‘don the harm he can’, whereas Alceste argues that the king can and must show mercy.²⁰ She asserts that if Cupid does not control his impulses, he *will resemble* a tyrant, even though, in his current behaviour, he already does. She provides indirect criticism by urging him to exemplify a good ruler, instead of publicizing his defects. By outlining virtuous kingship as a set of practices, she encourages Cupid to define himself against wicked exemplars by exercising compassion.

If the emphasis on political wisdom and exemplarity were not already clear, the fable of the lion and the fly — used in other *de regimine* literature to exemplify that the implementation of mercy preserves a king’s dignity — confirms the political nature of the *Prologue*’s advice.²¹ According to Alceste, the king of beasts responds to an offending fly by shooving it away with his tail, ‘al esyly’, because ‘Hym deyneth nat to wreke hym on a flye, | As doth a curre, or elles another best’ (ll. 377–82). For the lion to do anything other than brush the fly away softly

¹⁸ Phillips, ‘Register, Politics, and the *Legend of Good Women*’, pp. 118–19. See also Burnley, *Chaucer’s Language and the Philosophers’ Tradition*, p. 32.

¹⁹ Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, pp. 213–14; see also, Schlauch, ‘Chaucer’s Doctrine of Kings and Tyrants’, p. 151.

²⁰ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v., *fermour* (n.), a.

²¹ On the fable’s appearance in *de regimine* texts, see Percival, *Chaucer’s Legendary Good Women*, pp. 127–28. Additionally, the fable is also put to political use in Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. by Peck, vii.3387–3416.

would lower his status, since such a nuisance is not worth greater effort. While the thought of Chaucer comparing himself to an insignificant fly may be humorous, the fable strategically places Geoffrey in an utterly humble role compared to Cupid's status. Through this exemplum, Alceste categorizes Geoffrey's offence as a minor annoyance not worthy of heavy retribution, an alternative to Cupid's intense overreaction. And she argues that,

For, sire, it is no maystrye for a lord
To dampne a man withoute answeye or word,
And, for a lord, that is ful foul to use. (ll. 386–88)

Because Geoffrey offers no substantial threat, Cupid is obligated to be merciful in order to avoid shame.²²

Alceste's defence of Geoffrey should be read with this end goal in mind. She constructs the court poet's position as one fraught with peril and relative powerlessness in order to facilitate her argument that Cupid must mitigate his desired punishment. First, she envisions a courtly audience of envious 'losengeours', a term that denotes not only liars and flatterers among Cupid's courtiers but also evil counsellors, who 'pleyn' (complain, or make an accusation), 'feyn' (fabricate), and 'tabouren' (drum) falsehoods to supplant Geoffrey in Cupid's esteem (ll. 326–32).²³ The uneasy court atmosphere implies why it would be necessary for a poet to exercise caution and why Chaucer might opt to voice critique through Alceste for self-protection. The remaining defences offer various other denials of Geoffrey's accountability: he was 'nyce' and had no knowledge of what he was doing, he was commissioned to do the work and 'durste it not withseye', or he did not intend offence but merely translated the books of 'olde clerkes' who criticized love (ll. 340–52). These unflattering explanations articulate the various ways a poet may be judged: by malicious misinterpretation, by allegations of incompetence, by how well he performed his commission, or by how well he translated his sources. None grants the poet much creative control or personal autonomy from sources or patrons, and the combination characterizes Geoffrey as largely irresponsible for his own work and for readers' reactions. That Alceste, not Geoffrey, directs the narrative action and possesses the authoritative

²² The term *maystrye* of course evokes other Chaucerian discussions of power in struggles for dominance in love, counsel, and politics; it can pertain to sovereignty in relationships between two people or between a ruler and his subjects. See also the discussion in Chapter 3, pp. 103, 111–13.

²³ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. *losenger* (n.), defs a, b, d; *pleinen* (v.), def. 2; and *feinen* (v.), def. 2 (a). See Phillips, 'Register, Politics, and the *Legend of Good Women*', p. 118; and Percival, *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women*, pp. 117–20.

voice only intensifies this image of the poet as powerless. By articulating critique through Alceste, like his alter-ego Geoffrey in the fiction of the *Prologue*, Chaucer remains 'blameless' for the politicized content of his writings.

In a deft rhetorical manoeuvre, Alceste brings together her speeches, her categorization of Geoffrey as powerless, and the fable's emphasis on mercy as she finally exemplifies the 'proper' roles for Cupid and the poet:

And if so be he [the defendant] may hym nat excuse,
 [But] axeth mercy with a sorweful herte, [F: dredeful herte]
 And profereth hym, ryght in his bare sherte,
 To been ryght at youre owene jugement,
 Than ought a god, by short avisement,
 Considere his owene honour and his trespas.
 For syth no cause of deth lyth in this cas,
 Yow oughte to ben the lyghter merciable;
 Leteth youre yre, and beth somewhat trefable. (ll. 389–97)

Although spoken in generalities, her words clearly address Cupid's refusal to hear Geoffrey's defence and his wilful, hasty decision to punish the poet. Tellingly, Alceste shifts between the third person and direct address, moving from discussing 'a lord' or 'a god' to 'yours owene jugement', 'yow', and 'yours yre'. Such instabilities of address lay bare the strategy of exempla that employ the depiction of a noble protagonist to deliver the messages that *you* must reject ire and *you* must be merciful. Her techniques establish the foundation for understanding the legends, which respond to a prince's behaviour or an unwise choice in each exemplum, as transmitting significant advice to Chaucer's readers, the *you* that exists outside the fiction.

At the same time that Alceste instructs Cupid what to do, Chaucer nevertheless acknowledges the necessity of preserving a ruler's authority. Alceste concludes her defence with, 'I axe yow this man, ryght of yours grace, | That ye hym nevere hurte in al his lyve' (ll. 423–24). Cupid yields that Alceste may forgive Geoffrey and do with him what she pleases, but he does so within the context of petition, a rhetorical stance that permits him to maintain the illusion that his decision has been modified, not overturned. By casting Alceste as a subordinate petitioner, Chaucer indicates how a feminized position can paradoxically allow someone to evaluate and affect kingship without threatening the king's authority. Nevertheless, Cupid's response indicates his recognition that he could hardly have refused: 'I may, ne wol, not warne [deny] yours requeste' (l. 438). Alceste's intervention must also be viewed as an active, authoritative success, since her speeches convey that any course of action other than following her advice would make Cupid appear tyrannical and resistant to the practice of political virtues.

Alceste's skill at reforming Cupid has long been noted, but what I wish to highlight is that her deployment of exemplary logic leads to an imagined ideal resolution that also prescribes a role for Geoffrey. Her description of the penitent exemplifies for him the behaviours of a repentant soul who earnestly desires forgiveness, one who 'axeth mercy with a sorweful herte, | And profereth hym, ryght in his bare sherte' and essentially submits to Cupid's judgement (ll. 390–91). The replacement of 'dredful herte' (F Prol., l. 404) with 'sorweful herte' — one of Chaucer's very few revisions to this section — emphasizes repentance and regret, indicating that Geoffrey must appear remorseful, not simply afraid.²⁴ Alceste does not literally mean that he must wear a 'bare sherte' but that he must confirm that he deserves mercy by adopting a weak and humble persona.²⁵ Effectively, the core of her entire intervention consists of insisting that Cupid must assume the persona of a *ryghtwis* lord and view the poet as nonthreatening, while urging Geoffrey to adopt a stance of recognized humility and repentance in order to oblige Cupid to pity him. Geoffrey's failure to recognize or participate in the exemplum she has constructed for his benefit elicits her interruption to 'Lat be thyn arguynge', and results in the clarification that he must learn from her example not to contradict Cupid. Geoffrey's concluding exchange with Cupid finally demonstrates his own reform and his awakening to the possibilities created by a feminized persona.

Geoffrey's embrace of a feminized, 'powerless' position that recognizes Cupid's authority is followed closely by the active recovery of his poetic power. When Cupid asks whether the poet recognizes Alceste, Geoffrey's claim in the F *Prologue* that he does not know her identity may be plausible, for she has only been named once in his presence (F Prol., l. 432). By contrast, in the G *Prologue*, Geoffrey's identical claim is suspect because a group of ladies has sung a *balade* in her explicit praise (ll. 203–23), and she recently announced her own name (l. 422). Chaucer did not revise this inconsistency when he made other alterations to G, which suggests that Geoffrey's ignorance is intentional.²⁶ This scene

²⁴ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. *dredful* (adj.), defs 1a, 1d; s.v. *sorweful* (adj.), defs 1b, 2. In comparison to Machaut's *Navarre*, the emphasis on Geoffrey's need to appear penitent also distances him from the aggression of Machaut's Guillaume, whose major failing is his inability to repent or admit wrongdoing (see, for example, ll. 3787–3805, 3985–94).

²⁵ The *Parson's Tale*, ll. 991–92, recommends a similar penitential stance, which can also be compared to the 'bare sherte' in *Troilus and Criseyde*, IV, ll. 1520–24, that signifies poverty.

²⁶ Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Benson, p. 1065n. Alceste's name also appears in G, l. 179, when the narrator interrupts the dream vision to identify his rescuer immediately by name.

illustrates not his utter, stultifying cluelessness, but the opposite: Chaucer's narrator is now rhetorically astute enough to feign ignorance and submit to Cupid's superiority. From his authoritative position, Cupid may believe that he enlightens Geoffrey about Alceste's self-sacrifice and subsequent rescue by Hercules (ll. 501–04). Yet Geoffrey responds by amplifying her legend, partially with details of his own invention, such as her transformation into a constellation and his elaboration on why the daisy is a fitting symbol for her honour (ll. 513–21).²⁷ His embellishments indicate either that he already knew more than Cupid or that he seizes the opportunity to enhance Cupid's account. In either case, his apparent submission allows him to demonstrate his knowledge and creative power securely. His newfound rhetorical strategy acknowledges the display of weakness as paradoxically necessary to opening up a space for poetic authority to function without contradicting or angering Cupid.

In a composition concerned so clearly with exemplarity as a means to encode political advice, Alceste ultimately becomes the exemplar of feminized 'submissive but active' tactics that allow her to negotiate with Cupid safely and effectively. What other scholars have found problematic or ambiguous about Alceste turns out to be pragmatic and part of Chaucer's depiction of the poetic growth that transforms incompetent Geoffrey into a more adept critic of powerful men — the narrative voice of the legends.²⁸ Far from restricting the poet's voice, Alceste's intervention and commission of the legendary enable Geoffrey's reassertion of poetic control on a larger scale. Her redirection of the legal defence into advice on kingship in an exemplary mode becomes the model for Geoffrey's own deviation from his commission. Instead of simply following his assignment, Geoffrey will foreground love's tyranny, the damaging political results for aristocratic lovers, and the transmission of important broadly political lessons to Chaucer's own aristocratic audiences.

Unlike other palinodes, Geoffrey's poetic 'punishment' furthers his original cause and becomes central to the affirmation of his independent poetic authority: if he transgressed by discouraging men from loving women, then demonstrating men's falseness to good women will only compound his prior crimes against

²⁷ For a list of sources and alterations, see Phillips and Havely, *Chaucer's Dream Poetry*, pp. 283–86.

²⁸ On the *Legend* as an important stage in Chaucer's poetic growth between the *Troilus* and the *Tales*, see Frank, *Chaucer and The Legend of Good Women*, pp. 169–87. Frank focuses largely on Chaucer's manipulation of sources and the narrative innovations that explore human experiences, but the development of the narrator's more assertive voice through Alceste's influence too deserves recognition as part of this growth.

Cupid, even if it offsets the offence against women.²⁹ But there is one further detail that must be considered: even though Cupid ceded Geoffrey's punishment to Alceste, he still must have the final approval. He alters the original penance by ordering that Geoffrey begin with Cleopatra, a demand that, for all practical purposes, represents a hostile challenge to turn a woman who symbolized excess and the usurpation of power into an exemplary 'good' woman.³⁰ Much like Gower's King Alphonse in the *Three Questions*, Cupid sets up his target for failure by making an unreasonable request.³¹ Thus, even after Alceste has mitigated Cupid's wrath, the god retains a threatening authority that suggests that he cannot be fully reformed, a problem that in turn requires the poet to continue to address the dangers of *amor* for his readers and to protect himself while doing so. The legends therefore become the testing ground for Geoffrey's newly developed rhetorical awareness, and he must now demonstrate that he has learned from Alceste. As exploration of the narratives will show, Chaucer makes clear that the seeming loss of authority that Geoffrey endured in the *Prologue* may in fact be used to suit his own interests, whether or not they coincide with his commission. Like Alceste, the narrative voice of the legends also issues political critique and carves out a space in which the feminine impacts what one might assume to be exclusively masculine concerns: princely behaviours and the fates of kingdoms.

Following Alceste: Exempla and the Mediating Poet in the Legends

In the *Prologue*, Chaucer strategically deploys Alceste to underscore the division of power between men and women, patron and poet, lord and counsellor. From his own subordinate position, Geoffrey identifies with women's lack of authority, but another reason for his sympathy with the feminine in the legends can be traced to his understanding of the exemplum based on his *Prologue* experiences. Not only does Alceste prescribe behaviour for him, but she also sanitizes

²⁹ Ovid's *Remedia Amoris* and Machaut's *Jugement du roy de Navarre* and *Lai du plour* offer analogues in which the palinode could be taken seriously. See also Feimer, 'Chaucer's Selective Remembraunce', pp. 88–104, on the irreconcilable contradictions in Chaucer's palinode.

³⁰ On Cleopatra's reputation in the Middle Ages, see Kolve, 'From Cleopatra to Alceste', pp. 130–78; see also Kruger, 'Passion and Order in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*', pp. 223–25.

³¹ See above, p. 47. Of course, Cupid cannot reform, or he would cease to be recognizable as the God of Love, but external aristocratic readers can, and they are the real audience for Chaucer's advice.

his history, prefiguring the reshaping of classical narratives that Geoffrey will perform on the legends. In her presentation of his *curriculum vitae*, she constructs Geoffrey's career as if he were an exemplary love poet. More realistically, the works listed often subscribe to a different definition of love than the courtly one, and even those that treat amorous love fail to represent it in a completely favourable light. Alceste ambiguously describes lyric poetry written 'for [Cupid's] halydayes', 'other besynesse' that includes the *Boece* and translations, and the most vague category, 'many a lay and many a thyng' (ll. 410, 412, 420). She neglects to mention that some works privilege spiritual over earthly love, such as the *Boece* and the life of St Cecilia (the *Second Nun's Tale*). Others expose the folly or pains of *amor*, such as the story of Palamon and Arcite (the *Knight's Tale*) and the *Book of the Duchess*. In a few, like the *House of Fame*, the relationship of love to the text's more prominent themes is not entirely clear. Without openly denying the relevance of Cupid's interpretations, Alceste offers an alternative, positive interpretation of Chaucer's works that fashions Geoffrey as an exemplary court poet whose previous writings have served Cupid well.

Such a conflated presentation of Geoffrey's exemplarity calls attention to the fact that exemplars always are constructed by others, and their stories are manipulated to serve the author's intentions, regardless of historical fact, tradition, or obvious misinterpretation. The Wife of Bath's inquiry 'Who peyntede the leon?' (*Wife of Bath's Prologue*, l. 692) applies not only to her concerns about women misrepresented by male clerics but also to any exemplar reinterpreted by a later writer. This characteristic of the exemplum offers a new point of correspondence between the Chaucerian narrator and the women of the legends: he *experiences* the manipulation of his professional life into an exemplary narrative that contradicts his expectations. Chaucer thereby exposes the primary trouble with exemplarity: only the author's perspective matters, and if the audience trusts her, she may successfully engineer a story to fit her purpose, despite 'reality' or tradition. However, unlike the malicious *feyning* by courtiers, Alceste's good intentions to spare Geoffrey and to reform Cupid's behaviour motivate her manipulations, which are thus more pragmatic than problematic. Chaucer affirms that texts exist to be interpreted and that even flawed readings may be acceptable if directed toward a desirable end. Of course, he will perform the same kind of creative manipulations on classical figures, and he will take this strategy to extremes, perhaps most obviously by producing a greatly sanitized version of Medea and carefully omitting the revenge Procne and Philomela exact on Tereus so that he may render them 'good'. The legendary's strategic reinterpretations can be traced back to Alceste's deployment of exemplarity, in which she constructs a 'Chaucer' that must surely inspire cognitive dissonance for the author of works that philo-

sophically question the validity of *amor*. This experience simultaneously rescues Geoffrey and instructs him in the effective construction of exemplars tailored to specific purposes, *especially* ones that do not align perfectly with traditional interpretations. In the view implied by Chaucer's *Prologue*, the counsellor or poet maintains control over historical truths and authoritative texts in order to generate an exemplum that satisfies his or her current needs. For Alceste and for the narrator, this means steering discussions toward political virtues.

It should therefore not be surprising that the legends do not entirely match the assignment to write of women true in love and the false lovers who betray them. The abandoned women Dido, Hypsipyle, Medea, Ariadne, and Phyllis fit the paradigm, but Lucrece, Philomela, and Hypermnestra do not because they are victimized by men other than their lovers. And the tales of Cleopatra and Thisbe begin the collection with gender contradiction: at Cleopatra's death, the narrator announces how difficult it would be to find a man so 'trewe and stable, | And wol for love his deth so frely take' (ll. 703–04), before he goes on to depict Pyramus, who meets precisely those standards. The gender debate cancels itself out, and despite numerous scholarly attempts, the collection simply cannot be unified by the *Prologue's* described outline.³²

Scholars who acknowledge the poet's refusal to adhere to his commission have alternately argued for the work as ironically parodying the notion of a good woman, or, more sinisterly, as using the collection to promote misogynist views of women as sinful and of feminization as emasculation.³³ Yet even if Antony and Pyramus exemplify a form of feminization in their suicides, the *Legend* does not always represent feminization as weakness or negative behaviour as inherently feminine. After all, it is difficult to associate the abuses by Tereus and Tarquin with the weakness implied by feminization, for these rapists act violently masculine

³² Kruger, 'Passion and Order in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*', pp. 233–34n, provides an overview of readings that, for all their other insights, accept that Chaucer attempted to revise narratives to fit the *Prologue's* paradigm, including Frank, *Chaucer and The Legend of Good Women*; Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales*; and Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid*.

³³ Percival, *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women*, p. 323, sees Chaucer playfully engaging a courtly game in which his ironic depictions of women are meant to promote gender debate rather than empathy for women's positions. Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, pp. 65–87, proposes that Chaucer uses the *Prologue* to authorize a totalizing view of women that defines masculinity against femininity to finally produce a reductive view of all human experience. Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, identifies Chaucer's ironizing readings as foregrounding feminization as a negative, emasculated cultural position. But see also Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, pp. 26–38, for the validation of certain aspects of femininity as masculine ideals.

as only men can.³⁴ Even the dynastic heroes and traitors to love such as Aeneas, Jason, Theseus, and Demophoon, who all arrive in a foreign land in desperate need of aid, embody an arguably feminine powerlessness that becomes advantageous when it secures the pity of a powerful woman who then provides the assistance needed to complete their quests. Jason in particular embraces his feminization when he acts 'as coy as is a mayde' to win Hypsipyle's affections and, consequently, the 'substaunce' (wealth/supplies) to fund his journey (ll. 1548, 1560). By Cupid's standards, his deceit is deplorable, but, practically and politically speaking, his display of feminine weakness enables him to regain the upper hand and accumulate the provisions he needs to fulfil his destiny. Chaucer does not approve of Jason's amorous ruthlessness, for he conducts a lengthy attack on the hero's wickedness in love (ll. 1368–95), but Jason's performance indicates that a feminine persona may be an advantageous one, even for the strongest of men. Chaucer's Aeneas similarly adopts a feminized position when he weeps at his lack of prosperity and loss of position (ll. 1027–34), which leads to Dido's pity, and she lavishes upon him gifts that raise his state to one of 'more riches than evere he was in Troye' (l. 1253).

What this overview demonstrates is that irrational devotion to Cupid and feminization are not exactly the same. The legends allow Chaucer to work through performances of varying gender positions, not as indictments of the feminine or endorsements of masculine cruelty but as evidence that either men or women may be powerful or weak. By exploring gender flexibility, Chaucer asserts that the feminization of the poet depicted in the *Prologue* is not emasculating but strategic. As Alceste has shown and as the narrator is in the process of showing, a feminized position need not be a perpetually weak state.

Because the legends fall short of the guidelines set out in the *Prologue*, they succeed in demonstrating that Geoffrey has regained poetic control. As Steven F. Kruger proposes, the work 'is, at least in part, about how stories break out of prescribed patterns' and 'how literature defies the kinds of constraints that the God of Love and Alceste try to impose on it'.³⁵ But in the main, the texts depict unrestrained human passions as damaging and destroying social stability: women's aid to foreign men threatens their kingdoms' financial and/or political secu-

³⁴ The antifeminist counterclaim would be that they, like women, are morally weak, but their weakness drives them to the *masculine* act of rape. This violence cannot be seen as an attempt to overcome their feminine weakness through a masculine act, for that implies the self-awareness that they *are* powerless and weak in order to need to exercise power. Neither Chaucer's Tereus nor his Tarquin possesses such self-awareness or rational ability, inflamed as each is by his passionate, lustful desires.

³⁵ Kruger, 'Passion and Order in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*', p. 220.

rity; female rulers' suicides undermine political stability; male princes' violence against women engenders rebellion; and even the familial conflict in *Thisbe* subverts civic order. What Kruger shows, and what Michael St John also suggests, is that the legends unmistakably criticize love and address *political* topics more than they concern themselves with lovers' relationships.³⁶ Love relationships become the discourse through which Chaucer criticizes different aristocratic abuses of power or conflicts between personal desires and society's demands.³⁷ By showing how Cupid's influence leads both men and women to act selfishly without consideration for the broader impact of their choices, the work effectively criticizes political decisions that are wilful, individualistic, and shortsighted. While I accept Kruger's broader arguments, I see Alceste not as a part of the imposition of restraints on Geoffrey but rather as the model for his newfound poetic freedom. Instead of restricting his composition, her intervention exemplifies the submissive but active discourses that enable him to continue his critique of love's tyranny and of unwise political behaviours.

The composition of the legends constitutes Geoffrey's seeming submission to Cupid's desire for repentance, a supposed relinquishing of poetic *entente*. It is further a feminized performance because it is of Alceste's design, focused on women, and at least partially aimed at a female audience. But Chaucer shows his Geoffrey persona taking advantage of his supposedly submissive status to imitate Alceste's mode of advice-giving, which was characterized by avoiding direct statements of Cupid's faults and by using the exemplary mode to illustrate ideal political behaviours. Her strategy allows for self-protection at the same time that it permits bold speech, and, as we will see, the same concepts have influenced 'Geoffrey'; the legends show the previously inept narrator honing the same skills Chaucer used to characterize Alceste and thereby collapsing the distance between 'Geoffrey' and 'Chaucer'. Chaucer positions his narrator first as a commenter on the behaviour of princes and queens in narratives, and second as a counsellor *to* the male protagonists. But, of course, he is historically distant from his ancient exemplars, and he cannot really advise Jason or Tarquin. The point is that Chaucer delivers warn-

³⁶ St John, *Chaucer's Dream Visions*, pp. 193–204, proposes that Chaucer attacks various conventions of *fin amor* by inserting historical and political references that call attention to the ways that love's influences undermine the norms of society and political order.

³⁷ Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, pp. 1–13, discusses the 'antagonism between the desires of the individual and the demands of society' (p. 8), that framed medieval writers' articulations of selfhood. These tensions are clearly at work in the legends, where Chaucer's manifestation of poetic freedom ironically occurs while he insists that aristocrats must suppress their individual desires for the benefit of the kingdom.

ings to his audience through the legends, and not just the expected advice about love but also counsel on virtues that affect politics in a striking parallel to Gower's *Confessio*, in which advice to Amans is designed to foreground political virtues through amorous exempla.

Alceste's commission requires a form of hagiography, and the legends draw on the logic and expectations for this specific exemplary genre, albeit in a secularized form focused on classical narratives rather than Christian saints.³⁸ The texts therefore create models for Chaucer's aristocratic readers, who could and should identify with the high-ranking protagonists.³⁹ The F *Prologue* instructs Geoffrey to deliver his composition to Anne of Bohemia (F Prol., ll. 496–97), but the G revision removes that directive. While the edit may have occurred because of Anne's death, it also broadens the audience for the work beyond the queen and her court. Of course, there remains the indication of a female audience when the narrator warns, after Phyllis's suicide,

Be war, ye wemen, of youre subtyl fo,
Syn yit this day men may ensauple se;
And trusteth, as in love, no man but me. (ll. 2559–61)

But the same lines also point to a male audience that potentially is learning 'this day' (perhaps even from this text) new means to deceive women. If one imagines the work as circulating at court, which is at least a possibility implied by the F *Prologue*, the lines could constitute a joke among the mixed audience.⁴⁰ Perhaps more importantly, the lines echo warnings in both *Troilus and Criseyde* (v, ll. 1779–85) and *Anelida and Arcite* (ll. 197–203). The *Troilus* lines occur in the midst of the narrator's attempts to excuse himself for portraying Criseyde's unfaithful-

³⁸ On the *Legend* and hagiography, see Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales*, pp. 101–11; on the *Legend's* concerns with the ethical positions of hagiography in contrast to antifeminist hermeneutics, see Sanok, *Her Life Historical*, pp. 42–48.

³⁹ Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, pp. 232–36, explains the aristocratic fascination with classical literature and that such audiences saw classical antiquity as 'the legitimizing origin of their own nobility' (p. 235). As Hampton, *Writing from History*, pp. 8–14, observes, the local and particular elements of history are effaced as classical narratives are used to address contemporary issues appropriate to aristocratic readers, and the exemplary form encouraged readers to identify with and learn from protagonists.

⁴⁰ There is other evidence for a female audience for the *Legend*; McDonald, 'Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, Ladies at Court and the Female Reader', pp. 22–42, argues that a mixed-gender audience is integral to the poem's meanings and humour; see also Sanok, *Her Life Historical*, pp. 42–49. On Chaucer's primary masculine audience, see Green, *Poets and Princepleasers*, and Strohm, *Social Chaucer*.

ness, and they claim that he has written the work not only for men, 'But moost for wommen that bitraised be' to urge them to 'Beth war of men' (v, ll. 1780, 1785). The *Legend* aside recalls the lines where Chaucer most clearly articulates that the *Troilus* was meant to further truth in love and caution members of both genders against falsity, not to attack Criseyde or women. Chaucer thus subtly points back to Geoffrey's *Prologue* defence of his *entente*. The *Phyllis* lines warn women, but they also seek to legitimate the narrator's position by reasserting his authority.

Indeed, the legends are Chaucer's opportunity to move beyond ventriloquizing his ideas through Alceste's words and to articulate social and political critique in his own narratorial persona (as 'Geoffrey' begins to employ the skilful strategies that Chaucer used previously only in Alceste's character). To his aristocratic and undoubtedly mixed audience, he provides the required attention to women's amorous predicaments, but he also offers praise and blame for the political virtues and vices exhibited by main characters of both genders. Most of the political content boils down, as Kruger and St John have suggested, to arguments that one must prioritize political duty over personal and individual desires. Crucially, this lesson applies regardless of the protagonist's gender. Chaucer imagines women such as Dido and Medea as agents with impact on political realms. This valorization of feminine agency likewise asserts the authority of feminized counsel and challenges standard assumptions about gendered access to authority.

To clarify how the legends constitute the Chaucerian narrator's expression of his own feminized yet authoritative counsel, I focus first on the subtle elements inserted into the amorous narratives that indicate his political interests. Second, I investigate his more direct uses of exempla to offer political criticism in his own persona. Notable among the first category is that many opening lines signal political contexts: *Cleopatra* begins with Tholome's death, Cleopatra's accession, and Rome's hunger for conquest; *Thisbe* recalls queen Semiramis's construction of Babylon's town walls; *Dido* relates Aeneas's lineage and Trojan history for almost thirty lines before referencing the love story; *Hypsipyle and Medea*, once the narrator has berated Jason for his reprehensible amorous conduct, focuses first on the conflict between Pelleus and his brother that results in Jason's journey; and *Ariadne* criticizes Minos for his falsity in love but also his abuse of Crete's strength and cruel domination of Athens. The main love stories do not require these contextualizations any more than *Cleopatra* necessitates the detailed description of the weapons and strategies used at the naval battle at Actium. By providing such political circumstances and details, Chaucer invests each narrative with political significance.

For instance, the evocation of Semiramis reminds readers that she created *Thisbe's* physically restrictive context. The walls that constrained Pyramus and

Thisbe therefore are not simply the symbols of patriarchal restriction within each family but they also indicate a gender-neutral concept of problematic monarchical restriction. The lovers are inevitably caught within multiple constraining systems: they escape the walls only to be caught up in the melodramatic commitment to love that leads to their suicides. Kruger makes a persuasive case that the target of critique is societal structure, the pressures of which are inescapable, but the legend likewise calls into question Cupid's influence as Pyramus's sovereign.⁴¹ Pyramus's passionate embrace of death before he possesses incontrovertible evidence of Thisbe's demise links him to Cupid and thus obliquely to inadvisable political behaviours. His suicide exemplifies a form of rashness consonant with (although not identical to) Cupid's inflammatory ire at Geoffrey's poetry: both men commit the primary error of jumping to conclusions too soon. Just as Cupid demonstrates no *maistrie* by condemning Geoffrey without evidence, so Pyramus is tragically foolish for embracing death needlessly. Each man is a bad reader: Cupid wilfully misreads texts, and Pyramus misinterprets his experiences because love dominates his reason.⁴² Pyramus's amorous passion not only warns readers against trusting appearances without empirical evidence but also shows the fatal consequences of irrational, all-consuming emotion. Through Pyramus's lack of reason and echoes of Cupid's own flaw, Chaucer broaches an arguably political topic that is not so distant from Gower's interpretation of Pyramus as exemplifying *folhaste*, reason overcome by grief, which is a trait undesirable in a ruler.⁴³

To take another example in which personal circumstances illustrate political errors, when Cleopatra's last words boast that 'Was never unto hire love a trewer quene' (l. 695), Chaucer subtly points to the role she abandons when she commits suicide, and he therefore implies the broader, political tragedy caused by her death — leaving the country bereft of its ruler. Cleopatra may be 'trew and stable' in love (l. 703), but she and the other suicidal queens Dido and Phyllis violate the principles that might have secured stability for their kingdoms, the kind of stability that Alceste advised Cupid to embrace (l. 322). In the cases of dynastic heroes such as Jason, Aeneas, and Theseus, the political contexts remind readers why these traitors to love are nevertheless praiseworthy: they exemplify a necessary disavowal of individual desires in favour of social responsibility in the form of

⁴¹ Kruger, 'Passion and Order in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*', pp. 230–31.

⁴² On another note, *Thisbe* adds to the *Prologue*'s discourses of experience, authority, and interpretation the argument that, without a strong and thorough hermeneutic commitment, both texts and experiences can be misleading. See also Blamires, 'A Chaucer Manifesto', pp. 29–44, for analysis of experience versus authority with an emphasis on Pyramus and ocular proof.

⁴³ Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. by Peck, III.1331–1501.

duty to their kingdoms. In other words, the decisions that make them false lovers also make them heroes to their respective countries. Even when he must broadcast their cruelty in love, Chaucer cannot help but praise their heroic feats as if acknowledging that political duties required them to leave their lovers. For example, after his extended criticism ‘Thow rote of false lovers, Duc Jasoun, | Thow sly devourere and confusioun | Of gentil wemen’ (ll. 1368–70), the beginning of *Hypsipyle* replaces that characterization with one of Jason as an exemplary prince:

[...] [I]n his tyme in al that land there nas
Nat swich a famous knyght of gentilesse,
Of fredom, and of strengthe and lustynesse.
After his fadres deth he bar hym so
That there nas non that liste ben his fo,
But dide hym al honour and companye. (ll. 1403–08)

Jason’s praiseworthy qualities make his uncle Pelleus envious and uneasy; he sees Jason as a potential threat to his reign (ll. 1409–19). As a result, the reader is encouraged to see Jason as a worthy ruler and his eventual return to Thessaly as a politically necessary conclusion to replace his wicked uncle. Furthermore, in Aeneas’s case, the multiple evocations of his ‘destinee’ in Italy (ll. 952, 1299, 1329) call to mind the Trojan line through which most European royalty traced their roots, driving home another correlation between the classical exemplars and contemporary aristocratic audiences.

But the most telling moments occur when the narrator articulates explicitly political content only to make a show of dismissing it. The beginning of *Dido* announces Aeneas’s lineage and destiny, even though the narrator claims that these topics are ‘nat to purpos’ (l. 954). The opening lines of *Lucrece* frame it as recording the ‘exilynge of kynges | Of Rome, for here horrible doinges’ (ll. 1680–81), but the narrator then disavows this interest in favour of praising Lucrece. Another disclaimer appears later when he laments Tarquin’s violent deeds that do ‘dispit to chivalrye’ and ‘vilanye’ to Lucrece (ll. 1819–24). He simply says, ‘But now to purpos’ and then highlights Lucrece’s distress, pretending that his words on the behaviour appropriate to a king’s heir represented a digression. Yet another similar moment occurs when the narrator breaks the narrative flow to observe how appreciative a king’s son (Theseus) ought to be to someone who saved him from death (Ariadne), which is followed by the now-habitual claim, ‘But now to come ageyn to my matere’ (l. 1959). Such comments create the illusion of self-suppression, and through them, Chaucer creates an imagined dialogue with his reader that constitutes an early example of what Bakhtin has called the ‘word with a sideward glance’, the refutation that demonstrates an author anticipating

his audience's objections.⁴⁴ The narrator's assurances that his interjections are not part of his 'matere' protectively distance him from responsibility for his words, a move that seeks to placate in advance anyone who reads with narrow expectations like Cupid or who might claim that this material is irrelevant to love stories. However, through repeated claims that political content such as lineage, tyranny, and the behaviours of kings' heirs is alien to his 'purpos', Chaucer conspicuously underscores the political level of reading. Were this content truly unimportant, it would warrant excision, not repeated apologies. Precisely the disavowal of these comments' relevance indicates that politics and kingship interest Chaucer most.

By establishing political matters as a major contextualizing concept, Chaucer encourages the recognition of his more direct critiques as advice about political virtues and not simply reactions to one prince's amorous misdeeds. The narrator emerges from behind the screen of Alceste to advise audience members not only through his narratives but also his direct addresses to exemplars. His mode of political commentary is both less and more straightforward than Alceste's: he avoids using 'you' to refer to his outside audience, but he offers more substantial political evaluations through the guise of speaking to the ill-behaved princes. For instance, he openly criticizes Theseus for rejecting Ariadne, which provides a parallel to Medea's assessment of Jason and shows the narrator experimenting with judging aristocratic behaviours in his own voice. In the earlier of the two legends, Medea informs Jason,

[...] [F]or ought I se or can,
As of this thyng the whiche ye ben aboute,
Ye han youreself yput in moche doute.
For whoso wol this aventure acheve,
He may nat wel asterten, as I leve, escape
Withouten deth, but I his helpe be. (ll. 1611–16)

Chaucer couches her assistance in terms similar to Geoffrey's remark that he would have been dead without Alceste's aid (l. 182). Medea is right, but because the words appear in her speech, they open her up to charges that she is angling for a reward.⁴⁵ Yet in comparing this moment to Theseus's nearly identical lack

⁴⁴ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Emerson, p. 232. In Bakhtin's formulation, as in Chaucer's, the attempt to refute an audience's objection is designed to confirm exactly what the author claimed to refute.

⁴⁵ Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, pp. 239–40, proposes that the abandoned women in the legends, and especially Ariadne, represent 'grasping women' seeking social advantage through association with heroic men. Nevertheless, I take the narrator's final meditation on what Medea has lost and how little she gained, compared to what her advice enabled Jason to accomplish, as an earnest demonstration of sympathy.

of gratitude in *Ariadne*, it becomes clear that the interest in proper recompense stems from the poet, who observes more bluntly that Theseus's failure is indicative of shortcomings in a prince:

Wel maystow wepe, O woful Theseus,
That art a kynges sone, and dampned thus.
Me thynketh this, that thou were depe yholde
To whom that savede thee from cares colde!
And if now any woman helpe the,
Wel oughtestow hire servaunt for to be,
And ben hire trewe loveye yer be yere! (ll. 1952–58)

Even as it points out Theseus's amorous deficiencies, the claim that a king's son must reward any woman who helps him also echoes the more general principle asserted by Alceste that Cupid must honour his liegemen and reward or punish subjects' actions equitably (ll. 366–85).⁴⁶ But rather than expressing the concept through either Alceste or Medea, the narrator speaks these words himself. His interruption of the narrative reasserts his authorial control over the message of his poetry.

The criticism of Theseus is relatively mild, but in legends of victimized women, the assertive voice of the Chaucerian narrator truly emerges and takes aim at men for transgressions against love and kingship simultaneously. *Lucrece* contains the most consistent and powerful commentary through which Chaucer asserts the connection between personal and political activities. This is not unexpected, because her story was often used to accentuate how Tarquin's sexual abuse reflected his political shortcomings, but Chaucer's personal address to Tarquin is unprecedented.⁴⁷ After depicting Tarquin inflamed by his irrational lust to rape Lucrece, Geoffrey responds directly to him and his violations of kingly virtues:

Tarquinius, that art a kynges eyr,
And sholdest, as by lynage and by ryght,
Don as a lord and as a verray knyght,

⁴⁶ Of course, Alceste specifically aims to convince Cupid not to punish Geoffrey for a minor infraction, but the principle of rewarding people as they deserve applies in both instances to the king's official duties.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Gower's treatment of the story (Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. by Peck, VII.4593–5130), where, as Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority and Power*, pp. 293–95, has shown, the rape indicates Tarquin's covetousness and abuse of his knights' rights; Bertolet, 'From Revenge to Reform,' also notes the story's socio-political force. Even though, as Bertolet points out, Chaucer narrows the legend to a personal rather than public level (p. 410), Chaucer's version nevertheless has implications for the public perception of Tarquin's kingship, which he evokes in ll. 1680–81, discussed above.

Whi hastow don dispit to chivalrye?
 Whi hastow don this lady vilanye?
 Allas, of the this was a vileyns dede! (ll. 1819–24)

The lines elicit the disavowal ‘But now to purpos,’ as if the political commentary is a digression, but they are crucially important to criticizing Tarquin’s prioritization of passion over pursuits more appropriate to a king’s son like the duty to behave as a lord and knight. Chaucer puns on Tarquin’s ‘vilanye’ (wicked act) and the ‘vileyns dede’ (commoner’s or scoundrel’s deed) to amplify the shamefulfulness of his abuses as violations of noble conduct.⁴⁸ The political meaning of the tale is activated by pity for Lucrece: her body, the physical sign of the ‘horrible dede of hir oppressyoun’ (l. 1868), incites the people to overthrow Tarquin. Grammatically, ‘hir’ may indicate ‘her’ or ‘their’ oppression, and the ambiguity implies the polity’s identification with Lucrece. Sympathy for her produces not only the righteous rebellion but also the narrator’s outburst that clarifies Tarquin’s sins against chivalry and kingship. The topics echo Alceste’s speech on a king’s obligation to conduct himself properly, but the lines also demonstrate the development of the poet’s voice as political commentator. From behind the screen of addressing Tarquin, the narrator candidly criticizes villainous personal behaviours and the disregard of princely virtues in order to implicitly counsel his readers to act appropriately.

The characterization of an author compelled to analyse kingly behaviours finds its most potentially challenging articulation in *Philomela*, which revisits major elements of *Lucrece* but depicts a writer’s revolution as the result of tyranny. The narrator begins by asking how the ‘yevere of the formes’ (God) could have created Tereus to be so false, yet the God of *Love* is surely responsible for shaping Tereus’s specifically offensive behaviour, so the text ultimately disparages Cupid’s influence.⁴⁹ Tereus’s rape, adultery, and mutilation of his sister-in-law result from an obsession that leads him, like Tarquin with Lucrece, to exert his will over Philomela’s (ll. 2292–94). The narrator identifies a clear abuse of power:

By force hath this traytour don a dede,
 That he hath reft hire of hire maydenhede,
 Mauge hire hed, by strengthe and by his myght.
 Lo! here a dede of men, and that a ryght! (ll. 2324–27)

⁴⁸ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v., *vileinie* (n.), def. 3; *vilein* (n.), def. b.

⁴⁹ Simpson, ‘Ethics and Interpretation: Reading Wills,’ p. 90.

Tereus misuses his masculine strength, and the text refers to the violent rape as ‘a ryght’, normally a word signifying a morally just or honourable action.⁵⁰ On the contrary, Chaucer here suggests that such abuse constitutes a natural or socially typical deed that men commit, and he implicitly issues a warning echoed in the legend’s last lines that women must beware of men.⁵¹ Of course, this use of ‘ryght’ to describe morally reprehensible behaviour nevertheless calls to mind the ‘ryghtful’ behaviour that Alceste encouraged upon Cupid and the ‘lynage and [...] ryght’ that in *Lucrece* should oblige a king’s son to act morally (l. 323, l. 1820). Chaucer’s language ironically emphasizes how greatly Tereus’s ‘ryght’ conduct strays from praiseworthy ‘ryghtful’ actions. When distraught Philomela threatens to reveal his misdeeds, Tereus cuts out her tongue and casts her into a prison, where she is kept ‘to his usage and his store’, a suggestion that the abuse continues (l. 2337). Although she cannot speak, she weaves a message to her sister, who rescues her (and Chaucer conveniently omits their brutal revenge, preserving Philomela’s ‘good’ status).

The identification with the feminine implied by the similarities between Geoffrey and Philomela can be particularly advantageous and even subversive. James Simpson argues that the violent silencing of Philomela and the speechless poet in the *Prologue* are parallel examples of the suppression of authorship.⁵² This comparison is fruitful not least because both figures overcome that suppression. Perhaps more significantly, Tereus imposes brutal restraints on Philomela because he fears the broadcasting of the truth: he mutilates her, ‘For fere lest she shulde his shame crye | And don hym openly a vilenye’ (ll. 2332–33). He knows that his act is shameful but only harmful to him if openly revealed, and Chaucer ironically inverts the sense of *vilenye* used in *Lucrece* to describe rape to refer instead to what would be the deserved publicizing of the prince’s wickedness. The events and constraint of *Philomela* refine our perspective on the *Prologue*’s authorial predicament wherein the patron is placated and the poet encouraged to continue writing: just as Philomela finds a way to communicate, the legends indicate the poet’s ability to write his will, not only despite Cupid’s attempt at restriction but also in a text pre-approved by Cupid.

⁵⁰ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v., *right*, (n.), defs 1, 2.

⁵¹ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v., *right* (n.), def. 6a.

⁵² Simpson, ‘Ethics and Interpretation: Reading Wills’, pp. 87–95; see also Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, pp. 35–38. For competing views on the relationship between the narrator and women, see Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, pp. 8–15, who attributes to the narrator masculine anxieties about being feminized, and Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, pp. 65–87, who argues for Cupid’s and Chaucer’s shared intent to control the feminine.

Yet the comparison requires further examination. While *Philomela* offers a tragic counterpart to the comic salvation of the poet, it also reflects upon an extreme scenario of what could happen to him at the hands of a tyrannical authority figure. If Chaucer sees himself as another Philomela, this identification is a self-dramatizing, histrionic performance in the spirit of his exaggerated self-portrait as Geoffrey the daisy lover. The comparison divorces *Philomela* from Ovid's incredibly moving indictment of tyranny, rape, and mutilation to place it within the context of Chaucer's narcissistic dramatization of a threatening poet-patron relationship. Even though the narrative loses its tragic focus on the sisters Philomela and Procne, it exemplifies a strategy that I have been arguing informs the legends as a whole — the writer's identification with women as a paradoxical way out of a powerless position. *Philomela* repeats circumstances in *Lucrece* — the rapist inflamed beyond reason to control a woman no matter her wishes — and adds the prime role of the victim's writing in counteracting the tyrant. Even though Philomela has been robbed of her tongue and does not know how to write with a pen, 'letters can she weve to and fro', so that she produces a tapestry revealing 'al the thyng that Tereus hath wrought' (ll. 2358, 2363). As a result, the narrative warns subtly about overly restrictive circumstances that backfire on the tyrannical lord, asserting the writer's capability to fight back even in more violent and extreme situations than Chaucer's Geoffrey finds himself. The subversive message is registered but softened through its disguise as a courtly narrative that targets Tereus, written by a poet supposedly submissive to Cupid's commands. *Philomela* thus boldly — but not explicitly — defends a poet's power to criticize wilful rulers by arguing by analogy that such criticism is as necessary and legitimate as Philomela's broadcasting of Tereus's shameful deeds.

In the end, it is *Hypermnestra* that pushes Chaucer's poet as social critic to his breaking point, as its unique demonstration of inexcusable power over a victimized woman finally leaves him speechless. Significantly, in this case, the abuser is not a husband or rapist but Hypermnestra's father, Egistes, who commits the greatest offences to love and kingship because of his desire to protect his throne. He abuses familial love to manipulate his daughter by claiming that he loves her more than anything in the world, and then he threatens her life if she fails to kill her new husband (ll. 2635–46); in fact Hypermnestra's father ordered all fifty of his daughters to murder all fifty of their husbands, his brothers' sons, to thwart the prophecy that a nephew would kill him.⁵³ Chaucer may lament that Lyno was

⁵³ See Ovid, *Heroides and Amores*, trans. by Showerman, pp. 170–81. Chaucer reverses the names of Danaus and Aegyptus from Ovid's narrative.

‘so unkynde’ as to leave behind the wife who refused to betray him (l. 2716), but truly Egistes is the more villainous agent who first forces her to choose between her husband and her life, and who then orders her miserable imprisonment.

Hypermnestra finds herself in circumstances reminiscent of Alceste’s: she essentially sacrifices her life for her husband’s, except that her father forces her into this predicament. The narrator laments that ‘This sely woman is so weik — Allas!’, but before he depicts her sitting down to be taken prisoner while Lyno escapes (l. 2713, 2721), he writes that, ‘Hire crewel fader dide hire for to hente’ (l. 2715), attributing first to Egistes the responsibility for her capture and predicament. The final legend complicates the notions of tyranny and intercession developed in Alceste’s idealized role as intercessor and counsellor by depicting the impending unjust murder, not freely chosen self-sacrifice, of the heroine.⁵⁴ If the ruler’s personal behaviour operates as a metaphor for his treatment of his kingdom (as in *Lucrece*), then Egistes’s familial offence registers a disturbing parallel to the abuses of power by Tereus and Tarquin. *Hypermnestra* is especially troubling because it indicts a broader patriarchal authority through the figure of the father-king, who is not driven by irrational love but by irrational tyranny over both family and kingdom. In this light, it is plausible that the text trails off into silence as a form of self-suppression before the narrator finds himself in a position in which subtle, disguised critique of Egistes as a selfish patriarch becomes impossible. Geoffrey’s criticism has moved so far away from false lovers and toward tyrannical kings that he can no longer safely express himself without acknowledging the inherently political nature of his project.

As a whole, the legends present the Chaucerian narrator as a counsellor and authority who subtly inserts commentary on political virtues and princes’ behaviour into exempla depicting flawed amorous relationships. Prepared with the lessons he delivers, readers theoretically should be able to imitate the politically useful activities of his heroic men or clever women while avoiding the tragedies of love’s martyrs and the abusive rulers. Yet gender need not determine which character the reader imitates, for the work could enable either aristocratic men or women to mirror Alceste and Geoffrey as counsellors, creating a circle of influence in which femininity and masculinity matter less than a pragmatic attention to what is *ryght*.

⁵⁴ Indeed, Chaucer heightens Hypermnestra’s lack of choice in these matters through his description of the astrological influences that prevent her from being able to handle a knife in malice (ll. 2584–95).

Feminine Agency and the Feminized Counsellor

Despite the commission for the legends, the pervasively detrimental force in the narratives is not male or female, but Cupid's tyrannical *amor*. *Amor* threatens to distract men from their lofty political responsibilities, and the pangs of *amor* afflict the women who love too deeply, the aristocratic lovers who commit suicide, and the irrational princes who abuse their positions. Throughout the legends, femininity and masculinity only become dangerous when an individual is dominated by an irrational devotion to passionate emotions. Chaucer illustrates such irresponsibility in Antony, Cleopatra, Pyramus, Tereus, Tarquin, Phyllis, and other negative exemplars. Their unreasonable desires cause extreme gendered behaviour — hypermasculine rape and tyranny or hyperfeminine suicide — regardless of physical gender. In fact, one might view Medea and Philomela as barely saved from exhibiting a hypermasculine devotion to violent revenge because Chaucer curtails their stories. Overall, no one position on gender unifies the work. Chaucer celebrates the flexibility of gendered personae in the *Prologue's* submissive but active Alceste and feminized narrator, and then he deliberately creates legends that resist simplistic, universal attitudes toward gender. His purpose is not to resolve any gender debate, but instead to accentuate the tragedies that befall both the individual and the polity when a ruler or heir — male or female — prioritizes devotion to love and irrational desires over political duty. By depicting ill-advised amorous behaviour, Chaucer continues to critique both Cupid's tyranny and people who adhere to his laws rather than to political prudence.

But even as Chaucer's collection seems often to spotlight the political and dynastic activities of men, it also participates in the rethinking of classical texts that Simpson has identified as mediating between the Ovidian and Virgilian treatments of gender and politics. This reconsideration has important implications for how we understand Chaucer's views of women's agency, its relationship to political enterprises, and the feminized counsellor's role. As Simpson explains, Virgil's *Aeneid* represents 'a masculine, politically directed project', while the Ovidian position is attuned to women's experiences. Nevertheless, the Ovidian sympathy for abandoned women can 'unsettle and even undo the impersonal solidities of epic, and the assurance of accepted, masculine, imperial ideals'.⁵⁵ For example, in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dido represents an obvious distraction from Aeneas's imperial quest: Aeneas is criticized for being too devoted to her (*uxorius*) and for wasting idle hours (*teris otia*) in Libya when he has a greater destiny to fulfil.⁵⁶ Yet

⁵⁵ Simpson, 'Chaucer as a European Writer', p. 62.

⁵⁶ Virgil, *Aeneid*, ed. and trans. by Fairclough, iv, ll. 219–78, at ll. 266, 271.

in Ovid, she remains a subtle threat to masculine pursuits because she questions the imperialistic power that allows men to disregard women's experiences. From the perspective of a lord or king, because she challenges Aeneas's decision, Ovid's Dido represents a no less unsettling figure than Virgil's temptress. For Simpson, much of Chaucer's work mediates between the Ovidian and Virgilian perspectives so that treatments of amorous tragedies 'cannot help but expose the deep and potentially terrible connections between erotic passions and civic destruction'.⁵⁷ Certainly these 'terrible connections' are the primary means through which the legends offer political warnings against irrational choices. However, Chaucer also modifies the troubling views of his literary predecessors to foreground the essential role that Dido and similar women such as Hypsipyle, Medea, Ariadne, and Phyllis played in enabling heroes' achievements.

Chaucer's endorsement of political responsibility in the legends of heroes like Jason and Aeneas aligns him with Virgil, in that he values imperial duty. But, crucially, Chaucer restores the visibility of women's agency. Even when their activities are subordinated to masculine authority, Chaucer's soon-to-be-abandoned women exercise agency, and he depicts only their selfless actions that benefit the imperial goals of his heroic characters.⁵⁸ He makes women's instrumental role more palpable: in multiple legends specifically about dynastic heroes and their lovers, he represents women's agency not as dangerous or in need of repression but as working in consonance with masculine imperial concerns. Alceste benefits king and the kingdom through her advice and mediation, exemplified in both her famous commitment to Admetus and her political counsel to Cupid. Chaucer's Dido enables Aeneas by stocking his ships with provisions, beasts, and wine. Her declaration that 'al the worshiþe and encres | That I may goodly don yow, ye shal have. | Youre shipes and youre meyne shal I save' (ll. 1087–89) indicates Chaucer's recognition of her instrumental role. Similar events occur when Hypsipyle provides Jason 'substaunce' and Phyllis gives Demophon 'socour'. Likewise, Medea and Ariadne provide knowledge that saves a hero's life and assures him lasting fame for his exploits. Moreover, Chaucer minimizes the antifeminist fear that women's agency will subvert the entire socio-political structure. He omits the violent revenge by Medea and Philomela to preserve an image of women's agency as

⁵⁷ Simpson, 'Chaucer as a European Writer', p. 64.

⁵⁸ With the exception of Cleopatra, Chaucer largely overlooks the implications that women's amorous decisions have for their own countries; he omits open acknowledgements of the sort found in Machaut, like that Medea 'deserted her country and her father' (Guillaume de Machaut, *The Judgment of the King of Navarre*, ed. and trans. by Palmer, l. 2781). Chaucer focuses instead on how she helped Jason become king.

politically *good* and not simply emotional vengeance. The righteous rebellion in *Lucrece* threatens only the tyrant who deserves to be deposed, and Philomela and Hypermnestra take stands against clearly tyrannical men.

An objection to this reading is of course that Chaucer's mediating women do not have greater agency or receive more appreciation from the men they aid at the expense of their own well-being. Yet this same limited agency acknowledges contemporary historical practices: the state of being abandoned and finally left unrecognized for their contribution to men's achievements dramatizes women's often neglected and forgotten position in political activities. Contemporary trends in documentation ignored women's agency and granted authority to the actions of men alone, omitting women's names from records and denying women individual authority.⁵⁹ Similarly, descriptions of intercession characterize the male as the public authority figure and the woman as a petitioning, non-threatening influence.⁶⁰ Chaucer participates in and challenges this perception of women's roles by turns. It is clear that for him, men retain public, political authority, but many women support the ones who seem to deserve it (e.g., Dido, Medea, Ariadne), and Alceste authoritatively defines a good ruler's habits. Chaucer thus restores to these women recognition for their parts in imperial and political achievements, or, in the cases of Lucrece, Philomela, and Hypermnestra, their identification of rulers' inappropriate demands. He exposes their traditional invisibility most notably in his critiques of ungrateful or irresponsible men. As one who shares women's subordinate position with respect to masculine authority figures, Chaucer's narrator becomes the Alceste-like counsellor figure, absent in the classical narratives. His voice assesses characters' behaviours, and his voice teaches external readers to consider the political discourses embedded in his poetry. Neither counsellors nor women typically received the recognition they may have deserved for prominent men's achievements, but the *Legend of Good Women* attempts to remedy that erasure at the same time that it develops the poet's position as an authoritative counsellor. By celebrating the agency of women mediators, Chaucer also defends his narrator's feminized persona and its potential to contribute to political discourses.

Reading the legends in light of the *Prologue's* concern with political ideals and goals suggests that for Chaucer, women were not necessarily a disruption from empire and that by contrast they could play a pivotal role in politics. He mainstreams woman as participants in the 'masculine' political system, even in

⁵⁹ See, for example, Rosenthal, *Patriarchy and Families of Privilege*, pp. 175–77; and Bennett, 'Widows in the Medieval Countryside', pp. 18–36.

⁶⁰ Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, pp. 245–46; Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, pp. 95–111; see also Crocker, *Chaucer's Visions of Manhood*, p. 35, who observes women's invisibility in this process.

unofficial roles. The political outcome depends upon the balance between love (or other passions) and social responsibility in each individual narrative. Even though his treatment of women who abandon their countries for the sake of love calls into question their commitments as rulers, it nevertheless represents them as agents. Neither gender is represented as wholly ideal or wholly defective: the exemplars are both male and female, and some benefit their countries, while others endanger political stability because of irrational and extreme desires, regardless of their genders. However, Chaucer begins with, and is supposedly leading up to, a figure in whom devoted love and stately obligations coexist harmoniously — Alceste. Therefore, at some level, he is committed to the concept that women can exercise authority and balance emotions with the assurance of political stability; even if the latter was not a feature of classical narratives about Alceste, Chaucer's portrayal certainly aligns her with it. And finally, by comparing the disenfranchised women to the poet whom Cupid so thoroughly wishes to control, Chaucer asserts that counsellors and poets ought not be constrained and should be recognized for their contributions to political discourses. To do otherwise would be unbecoming a proper ruler.

In effect, the legends bring the initial juxtaposition of authority and experience full circle to demonstrate how authoritative texts can be reshaped to reflect the poet's experiences and the topics he finds most important to shaping his readers' perception of virtues. Chaucer has read classical texts, and his narrator persona has experienced the tyranny of Cupid and witnessed Alceste's arguments against inadvisable misuses of political power. The speaker of the legends accrues authority based on his experiences, his knowledge of literary sources and political virtues, and his ability to refashion them into meaningful exempla. These qualities can be traced back to Alceste, and her skilful management of Cupid mirrors Chaucer's own desired effect on his audience — that they will likewise weigh the political implications of their actions against personal, emotional responses. However, there remains one inconsistency between the *Prologue* and legends: if Cupid should be praised for embracing pity as a lord-deity, then men like Aeneas and Jason conversely are celebrated for imperial achievements that would have been impossible were it not for their lack of pity for their lovers. The disjunctions that make the *Legend* difficult to unify point toward staple premises of mirrors for princes and exemplary literature: that the text is not prescriptive and that inconsistencies can be valuable occasions to force readers to engage the material more closely. These lessons teach that no one course of action is always the right one; instead, the context constructs which behaviours are appropriate. The practices of deliberation and the flexible evaluation of particular terms and circumstances are perhaps the most important lessons learned from Alceste and applied

to Chaucer's legendary. The distinction between the universal and particular and its impact on both gender and political advice are certainly topics of interest to Chaucer, for he takes them up more thoroughly in the *Melibee*.

EXEMPLARITY AND CHAUCER'S *MELIBEE*: CONTEXTUALIZING PRUDENCE'S AUTHORITY

Gower's Peronelle and Chaucer's Alceste intervene to challenge and reform monarchs, and each derives her authority to a certain degree from her status as woman or wife. In the *Melibee*, Chaucer continues to reflect on the submissive but active strategies by which a female counsellor succeeds; at the same time, he also explores the function of proverbs (maxims attributed to famous intellectuals or anonymous sayings) and authoritative wisdom through Prudence's advice to her husband.¹ The tale's narrative is deceptively simple: Melibee's household is attacked by three enemies who injure his daughter Sophie, and the tale traces the advice Prudence gives him for how to handle his grief, his desire for revenge, his advisory councils and other arguably political matters, and, finally, his wish for a peaceful reconciliation. Through her counsel, Prudence persuades Melibee toward patience and peace, and she then negotiates with their enemies on his behalf. The proverbs and authorities that she quotes to support her counsel comprise the bulk of the tale and align it with advice to princes works that similarly rely on invocations of authorities such as Solomon, Cassiodorus, and the Bible. Such a heavy focus on authoritative advice over narrative plot leaves many modern readers understandably bored, but the sparse narrative contexts for Prudence's counsel are nevertheless essential to understanding how her authority develops and expands over the course of the tale.

What makes the *Melibee* striking is its interest in the tensions between the universal and particular, which Chaucer brings out first through Prudence's gender.

¹ Following medieval usage, I employ 'proverbs' to encompass a broad range of didactic statements, whether anonymous or attributed to authoritative sources; Bowden, 'Ubiquitous Format?', pp. 173–74, lists all the myriad terms for medieval proverbs.

Prudence's very name triggers an immediate association with the abstracted authorities of personification allegory, but Chaucer anchors her quite clearly to the literal realm with continuous references to her womanhood that point to the social and gender hierarchies that would constrain her authority.² Her ensuing defence of her suitability to advise Melibee asserts that she must be evaluated as an individual, not according to stereotypes. This insistence that universalized 'wisdom' must be interpreted in context becomes the defining hermeneutic strategy of the *Melibee*, exemplified by Prudence's careful analysis of proverbs within the context of Melibee's crisis. Because Chaucer forces readers to consider her as an individual woman and represents her as respectfully deferential, her strategies are feminized, but they are also part of the dramatization of how someone lacking authority develops the authority not only to counsel but also to act as a political agent. As an exemplar, Prudence embodies the tensions between universal and particular that are essential both to interpreting advice and to understanding how a feminized performance can generate authority. Representing a woman who must defend her ability to counsel provides Chaucer the opportunity to explain how counsel should work and to insist that one must evaluate universalizing statements, whether they apply to women or politics.

The political relevance of the *Melibee* has been disputed because Chaucer typically avoids the topical references that would confirm a political purpose. However, the literary contexts for his sources demonstrate the text's potential to function as political counsel. And even the *Canterbury Tales* framework permits reading this particular marital relationship as an exemplification of the lord-counsellor relationship. More significantly, a fifteenth-century manuscript, San Marino, Huntington Library, MS HM 144, recontextualizes the *Melibee* and *Monk's Tale* within a moral anthology and offers a distinctly politicized reading in which the scribe features Prudence's advice as critical to preventing the falls of princes. The scribal changes and original linking text demonstrate that it was indeed possible for Chaucer's medieval readers to find political meaning within the *Melibee*. Thus, the manuscript supports scholarly readings of the *Melibee* as political, such as those by Larry Scanlon, Judith Ferster, and Lynn Staley, with

² Even when human gender appears relevant, as when Jean de Meun's dreamer scolds Reason for using unladylike language (Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. by Dahlberg, ll. 6928–43), it does not significantly detract from the personification's overall authority. When scholars begin to discuss the literal qualities of 'personifications' that make them seem more like individual personae than abstractions, the form of allegory seems more like the allegoresis described by Akbari, *Seeing Through the Veil*, pp. 12–16, than fully developed personification allegory. The emphasis on Prudence's gender that resists abstraction leads me to propose exemplarity as the more dominant allegorical mode.

evidence from a late medieval reader.³ Both versions of the *Melibee* indicate that women are 'good to think with', and that the woman counsellor is a believable role from which a writer may begin in order to engage broader political issues of counsel, authority, and a prince's self-governance.

Chaucer's Melibee: Prudence in Context

Framing Contexts for the *Melibee*: Albertano, Renaud, and Chaucer

Chaucer closely translates *Le Livre de Melibee et de Prudence* by Renaud de Louens (c. 1336–37), itself a translation of Albertano da Brescia's *Liber consolationis et consilii* (c. 1246), to which Chaucer also may have had access. These Latin and French sources indicate that the tale's reception heavily depends upon the context provided by headnotes or dedications. Albertano's text guides his son John, a surgeon, to recognize parallels between caring for patients' physical health and revitalizing their intellectual faculties; the preface directs John to 'Ecce similitudo' (Look at this picture) to learn those authorities that will help him persuade 'distressed and immature' spirits.⁴ It may initially seem that Albertano wishes his son to imitate the prominent surgeons and physicians who offer sound advice in Melibee's first council after the attack, but their failure to arrest his impulse toward vengeance suggests that a surgeon's perspective alone is insufficient. The obvious referent for the healing *similitudo* is Prudence, who convinces Melibee to forego revenge and prioritize peace; she becomes an exemplar for John and other readers. Albertano's original thus asserts the advantages of a feminized or deferential subject position for a counsellor who would reform a troubled pupil.⁵ The successful adviser — male or female — must imitate Prudence, who chips away at Melibee's resistance and gradually earns an authoritative position from which to affect policy.

However, the story was not always read with Albertano's dedication, for Renaud's French translation instead presents *Le Livre de Mellibee et de Prudence* as a political manual. He dedicates it to an aristocratic patroness as advice for her

³ Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority and Power*, pp. 206–15; Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, pp. 89–107; and Staley, *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II*, pp. 165–263.

⁴ Albertano da Brescia, *Liber Consolationis et Consilii*, ed. by Sundby, p. 1; translation in Albertano da Brescia, *Liber consolationis et consilii*, trans. by Askins, p. 331. Askins's translation directs readers to visualize the exemplum; Albertano may also have intended to point to the similarity between the surgeon's role in healing the body and the adviser's role in healing the mind.

⁵ See Powell, *Albertanus of Brescia*, p. 77, for the complementary claim that Albertano articulates a positive evaluation of femininity within the social order.

son: 'I have translated a little treatise for the instruction and the profit of my dearest lord, your son, and all the other princes and barons who might want to heed it and to study it.'⁶ In his formulation, the objects of instruction are the young aristocrats whom he hopes will heed its counsel, and his dedicatee becomes like Prudence, the mediatrix bringing authoritative advice to the young lord who needs it. Although it is impossible to tell whether Chaucer had access to Renaud's dedication (or to Albertano's), the French framework confirms the text's capability to function as a mirror for princes if the reader or author so inclines.

Chaucer's purpose is more difficult to assess, but his interest in Prudence's role demonstrates that his tale functions as an exemplum deeply engaged with the process of giving moral counsel and establishing the authority to do so. The *Melibee* lacks a dedication, and the Prologue gives little direction to readers: it introduces the 'litel tretys' (surely a jest) as 'a moral tale vertuous' that offers an alternative to the 'verray lewednesse' and 'drasty rymyng' of *Sir Thopas* (ll. 921–66).⁷ In the wider frame of the tale-telling contest, the Host Harry Bailly has defined the best tale as the one that combines *solaas* and *sentence* (General Prologue, l. 798). *Thopas* and *Melibee* irreparably split these two elements, perhaps as Chaucer's commentary on the difficulty of combining the two satisfactorily for a bourgeois audience.⁸ Chaucer's major alterations from his sources nevertheless give some indication about his goals for his sententious *Melibee*, and the role of the feminine cannot be underestimated. In addition to suppressing topical political material (e.g., omitting the maxim 'Woe to the land with a boy as a king'), Chaucer increases Prudence's visibility as a woman through new references to her as wife, 'noblewyf', and 'noble lady' not present in his sources.⁹ As a long dialogue between a husband who is beset by problems and a good wife who advises him,

⁶ Renaud de Louens, 'Le Livre de Mellibee et Prudence', ed. by Askins, p. 331.

⁷ All citations of *The Canterbury Tales* derive from Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Benson.

⁸ Gaylord, 'Sentence and Solaas in Fragment VII of *The Canterbury Tales*', pp. 226–35, explores Harry's control over the contest as a dramatization of the problem facing a poet of balancing *sentence* and *solaas* while also pleasing multiple audiences. That the two are most divided in the tales attributed to Chaucer's narrator only increases the likelihood that they address the poetic concerns specific to his occupation as an author. Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, pp. 98–99, suggests that the Host's negative view of *Thopas* places Chaucer in a position of reduced authority that aligns him with Prudence and the feminine values articulated in the *Melibee*. If that is the case, then Chaucer is also reasserting his authority through a specific turn to *sentence* that redefines a feminized position, like his own, as an authoritative one.

⁹ On Chaucer's alterations, see Staley, 'Inverse Counsel: Contexts for the *Melibee*', pp. 149–50, and Staley, *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II*, pp. 190–92, for political topics; and Palomo, 'What Chaucer Really Did to *Le Livre de Mellibee*', pp. 316–17.

the *Melibee* grapples with the question of women's legitimacy as counsellors and becomes part of broader debates about women's sovereignty in the *Canterbury Tales* featuring, among others, Griselda, Alisoun of Bath, Dorigen, and Cecilia.¹⁰ Prudence adds a measure of authority to this matter, in particular because she cites numerous classical and biblical authorities on political topics, from Cicero and Seneca to Solomon and Petrus Alphonsus. Her calm, rational reaction to the enemy attack illustrates how to approach a political crisis, and she counsels her husband on topics including advisers, deliberation, peace, and reputation.

Yet Chaucer distracts from the political content of the *Melibee*, protecting himself through the Host's concluding response. Throughout the *Tales*, Harry Bailly has been a questionable reader: he both attempts to control the meaning of tales, and he narrowly interprets or misinterprets a number of tales.¹¹ In this case, Harry enthusiastically identifies Prudence as an exemplar for his wife Goodelief and then describes the aggressive behaviour that might be reformed according to Prudence's model (*Prologue of the Monk's Tale*, ll. 1894–1922). His reaction suggests one mode by which contemporaries might understand the tale, and it suits his personal circumstances, but it ignores the *political* component of Prudence's advice on counsel and kingship. By singling out his wife rather than his sovereign or the king's counsellors for reform, the Host's comments allow Chaucer to elide political criticism. Chaucer's framework distances him from political debates of the 1380s, just as surely his omission of the line 'Woe to the land that has a boy as a king' permits him to address contemporary issues without seeming to do so directly.¹² But Harry's response also underscores Prudence's exemplarity, which is essential to interpreting the *Melibee* beyond the marital debate of other *Canterbury Tales*. Through Prudence, the tale illustrates a functional model of counsel that prevents Melibee from making unwise political decisions. Chaucer has placed a very political text within the guise of a marital negotiation, drawing parallels between political counsel and marriage.

As in the cases of Peronelle and Alceste, the female mediator finds success by highlighting her submissive position relative to a powerful man. As David Wallace has suggested, Prudence occupies a wifely role that paradoxically ena-

¹⁰ See, for example, Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, pp. 70–99.

¹¹ Gaylord, 'Sentence and Solaas in Fragment VII of *The Canterbury Tales*', p. 235, succinctly lists all the problems associated with Harry's interpretations and how they allow Chaucer to address various issues facing an author.

¹² See Staley, 'Inverse Counsel: Contexts for the *Melibee*', pp. 142–49. See also Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, pp. 99–104, who contextualizes the *Melibee's* advice within the crises between Richard and the Appellants to argue that it was intended to challenge the Appellants.

bles her to critique and reshape Melibee's ruling practices safely.¹³ Yet, as I wish to emphasize, Prudence's persuasion is not exclusively tied to her marital status; rather, she exemplifies rhetorical and intellectual skills in negotiation and argumentation. Moreover, through her successes, Chaucer develops a sense of collaborative authority shared between the couple. As a number of scholars have observed, neither Prudence nor Melibee really acts independently of the other; husband and wife work in tandem to bring the tale to a peaceful conclusion.¹⁴ The *Melibee* is unique among Chaucer's depictions of marriages, however, in that Chaucer indicates that women's sovereignty, when fully realized, permits a wife not only to have some say in shaping her husband's decisions but also to exercise the temporary authority to put those decisions into action and resolve conflict to mutual benefit. Prudence exemplifies ideal feminized virtues, and she models activities that noble women readers might imitate to gain agency.¹⁵

However, such lessons are imperative not only for female household partners but also for *male* political counsellors, who share the wife's subordinate position relative to their superior and who should similarly advocate for the best interests of both the king and his subjects. What makes the *Melibee* stand out among contemporary texts is its dramatization of the contextual nature of advice: Prudence has different kinds of authority at different points in the tale, her use of proverbs shifts depending on the narrative moment, and her authority ultimately depends on her ability to interpret how (or whether) universal truths pertain to specific circumstances. In Chaucer's hands, the *Melibee* becomes an instruction manual that teaches readers how to interpret proverbs thoughtfully and develop authority through the depiction of Melibee and Prudence as exemplars for lord and counsellor.

Prudence's Authority: From Domestic Helpmate to Political Counsellor and Mediator

Although the narrative level is thin, Chaucer provides enough information to permit a closer analysis of Prudence and of the power dynamics in her relationship to Melibee. The tale gradually undoes the notion of personification more and more to

¹³ See Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, pp. 237–46, on the necessity of a woman, and wife in particular, intervening to soften Melibee's perspective.

¹⁴ On their cooperative partnership, see Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, pp. 70–99; Crocker, *Chaucer's Visions of Manhood*, pp. 33–34; and Moore, 'Apply Yourself: Learning While Reading the *Tale of Melibee*', pp. 89–91.

¹⁵ See Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, pp. 95–99; and Collette, 'Heeding the Counsel of Prudence', pp. 424–29.

present her as a literal woman who more properly belongs to the exemplary mode.¹⁶ Chaucer stages her transition from domestic wife to authoritative political counsellor and then mediating political agent through men's submissions to her, which occur at intervals throughout the text: when Melibee ceases weeping and convenes his first council (l. 1004), when he allows her to advise him in earnest (l. 1114), when he agrees after her semblance of wrath to do as she asks (ll. 1702, 1712), and when he allows her to act on his behalf and the enemies, too, empower her to act on their behalf (ll. 1724–25, 1741–51). With each submission, her authority grows, and the fundamental questions become not whether or not Prudence may possess authority, but to what degree and under what circumstances.

Initially identified as wife and mother, Prudence's first action introduces her as an adviser when she persuades her husband away from his grief over their daughter's injuries. Attention to her words and structures of argument show her as respectfully subordinate but with an eye to fostering authority. Throughout the text, she expresses respect for her husband: she twice waits until she 'saugh hir tyme' before she speaks on sensitive matters (ll. 980, 1051), she frequently uses 'my lorde' or 'sire' as terms of address, and she usually softens opposition to her husband by begging his pardon with a respectful 'save youre grace' (e.g., ll. 1070, 1082). Yet this respect does not always equate to the deferential submission of wife to husband. When Prudence calmly applies to the distraught Melibee the Ovidian advice that a man must comfort a grieving mother only once she has wept her fill, she reverses the expected gender roles (ll. 977–78). Even though Prudence functions as a wifely helpmate tending her spouse's private needs, Melibee behaves like Ovid's grieving mother, and Prudence fulfils the masculine role.¹⁷ This temporary inversion calls attention to the fact that gender can be a metaphor for power dynamics,¹⁸ and it foreshadows the shifts in power and authority that occur as the tale progresses. On the surface, Prudence's early advice pertains to her family, but it launches the more political action of the tale because she recommends that Melibee take counsel from close friends and relatives to determine how to respond to the enemy attack.

¹⁶ Even allegorical readings must grapple with what Strohm, 'The Allegory of the *Tale of Melibee*', pp. 32–42, calls an intrusion of the literal. See also Walling, "'In Hir Tellyng Difference': Gender, Authority, and Interpretation", pp. 172–74, and Crocker, *Chaucer's Visions of Manhood*, pp. 32–36.

¹⁷ See Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, pp. 221–21; Rigby, *Chaucer in Context*, pp. 155–60; and Daileader, 'The *Thopas-Melibee* Sequence and the Defeat of Antifeminism', p. 33.

¹⁸ Walling, "'In Hir Tellyng Difference': Gender, Authority, and Interpretation", shows that the tale's "hermeneutics of gender" (p. 170) explore problems of authority and power.

Because Melibee follows her advice inattentively, his council is a failure that demonstrates his need for better advising on both personal and political topics. As Prudence later argues, his manner betrays his desire for vengeance (ll. 1249–51), so that even though he fulfils his obligation to hold a council, it is only a formality that reinforces his impulsive wishes. In addition to stable advisers represented by the surgeons, physicians, and wise lawyers, Melibee's council includes many types that Prudence will identify as inappropriate counsellors — young men, reconciled enemies, neighbours who revere Melibee out of fear, not love, and flatterers (ll. 1241–45). The wise men in attendance urge peace and deliberation, but the false friends, envious neighbours, and young folk vociferously favour retaliation (ll. 1012–34). Even Chaucer's language contrasts the deliberation and rationality of the good counsellors with the warmongers' hasty, emotive response. When the youths rise to speak, they 'up stirten' — an action associated with a sudden leaping and the flaring of emotion — as they jump to conclusions about vengeance (l. 1035).¹⁹ In contrast, among the measured speakers, each man simply 'up roos' for his turn (ll. 1011, 1021, 1037). Nevertheless, Melibee ignores the wise advice that he must deliberate before acting (l. 1042), and the majority present validate his predisposition toward vengeance. The *pro forma* meeting does not take even the letter of Prudence's advice to heart, and it illustrates Melibee's failures to restrain his wilful desires and to recognize good advisers.

This flawed council necessitates Prudence's further intervention, but first, she must move beyond the influence Melibee granted her as wife (which was only partially effective) and gain recognition as an authoritative political counsellor. Her opening gambit reflects her seemingly submissive stance, but it also reveals her potential to assert herself:

[W]han that she saugh how that hir housbonde shoop hym for to wreken hym on his foes, and to bigynne werre, she in ful humble wise, whan she saugh hir tyme, seide to hym thise wordes: 'My lord', quod she, 'I yow biseche, as hertely as I dar and kan, ne haste yow nat to faste and, for alle gerdons, as yeveth me audience' (ll. 1051–52)

Prudence's humble request for audience evokes the subordinate wife, yet before waiting for permission to be granted, she makes her recommendation against hasty decisions, followed by citations of Petrus Alphonsus and proverbs against haste (ll. 1053–54). She asks her husband's consent, but she begins to make her plea without authorization. Melibee's subsequent refusal to entertain her coun-

¹⁹ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. *upsterten* (v.), defs a, b. Compare the *Knight's Tale*, ll. 1299–1300.

sel signals the difference between her earlier words that curtailed his grief and this intervention. He lists a number of objections, primarily that he would be criticized for changing his mind at her behest, that women are wicked, that it would appear that he had given her mastery over him, and that her advice would constitute a forbidden secret counsel (ll. 1055–63). His objections have a distinctly antifeminist tone, and Prudence dispels them in demonstrations of great rhetorical skill.²⁰ She must defend her right as an individual woman to give counsel, since her literal gender limits her access to the authority a personification would possess. Furthermore, narrative context is significant: Melibee's protests only occur when she seeks to exert a stronger influence on his policy. This contrast to his prior acceptance of her counsel indicates that he welcomes her advice on informal, private matters like his grief but that he resists her counsel as unacceptable when it concerns serious political decisions.

Conceptually, Prudence's answers also point to the fundamental lesson that 'universal truths,' advice, and proverbs only gain significance within specific contexts, a lesson that underpins the majority of her advice. To Melibee's complaint that he would be foolish to change his mind because of her counsel (ll. 1054–55), she argues that, 'it is no folie to chaunge conseil whan the thyng is chaunged' — under certain circumstances, it is more advisable to change counsel than to maintain a course of action (ll. 1065). This response points to the general necessity of evaluating contexts before making decisions, and Prudence's defence of her gender against antifeminist stereotypes becomes the test case for proving that advice cannot be taken out of context. Prudence asserts that Melibee knows from past experience that the popular stereotype that women cannot keep a secret does not apply to her: 'That am nat I' (ll. 1084–89). She shows that his 'authoritative wisdom' is an irrelevant excuse at best, not based on logic or evidence. In addition, she cleverly claims that in the right context, the statement, 'In wikked conseil wommen venquisschen hir housbondes,' should be interpreted to mean not that all wives use counsel to bring their husbands to ruin but rather that when his counsel itself is wicked, a woman may prevail over her husband to avoid wickedness (ll. 1090–94). Whereas Melibee sees *venquishen* referring to achieving a deceitful victory, Prudence interprets it as prevailing in a moral or spiritual conflict.²¹ She reinterprets the proverb from a sense that mischaracterizes her efforts to one that supports her specific aims, transforming antifeminism into an evoca-

²⁰ See Daileader, 'The *Thopas-Melibee* Sequence and the Defeat of Antifeminism,' pp. 33–37; and Walling, "'In Hir Tellyng Difference': Gender, Authority, and Interpretation,' pp. 169–74.

²¹ Both interpretations are attested in Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v., *venquishen* (v.), defs 1, 2.

tion of the role of moral counsellor that some clerical writers endorsed as a positive role for wives.²² Yet Prudence encourages Melibee not simply to behave morally but also to avoid politically disastrous decisions.

When Prudence offers exemplars of good women advisers to bolster her case, those women's stories also establish that context and perspective determine whether counsel or a person is deemed good or problematic. Rebekah, Judith, Abigail, and Esther may seem to undermine her enterprise because each deceives, disobeys, or leads to ruin the man she advises.²³ While male poets might have felt some discomfort at such strong women who challenge the politics of patriarchy, they frequently represented them as women authorized by God to act in the best interests of their people.²⁴ From Holofernes's perspective, certainly Judith seems a seductress and wicked counsellor, but from a view that takes into account God's will to protect his chosen people, she is a mediator and heroine who acts against forces that threaten her community. Her story illustrates the ambiguous nature of counsel, and it justifies women's suitability to participate in affairs that affect the polity. Rebekah and Abigail likewise can be defended as acting for the common good, and Esther was one of the most frequently cited models for wives and queens, celebrated for her intercession with her husband to protect her people.²⁵ These biblical precedents underscore the necessity of perspective to resolve the ambiguity often involved in women's interventions — is she a deceitful shrew or an ideal adviser? Pragmatically speaking, the answer depends on context, the same solution to the opposition between Melibee's antifeminist generalities and Prudence's specific interpretations. To further combat antifeminist generalizations, Prudence explicitly establishes the context in which Melibee must interpret her. After noting that 'manye wommen been goode, and hir conseils been goode and profitable', she asserts that 'if ye wol triste to my conseil, I shal restoore yow youre doghter hool and sound. And eek I wol do to yow so muche that ye shul have honour in this cause' (ll. 1109–11). By presenting herself as a particular example of a generally favourable view of women, Prudence validates her intervention and advice as essential means to two important, mutually beneficial ends.

Melibee's antifeminism, like his botched council, exemplifies his broader political failing that Prudence must resolve: his resistance to advice that challenges

²² Farmer, 'Persuasive Voices: Clerical Images of Medieval Wives', pp. 517–43; see also, Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, pp. 221–23.

²³ Waterhouse and Griffiths, "'Sweete wordes" of Non-Sense (Part II)', p. 55.

²⁴ *Heroic Women from the Old Testament*, ed. by Peck, pp. 114–16.

²⁵ On the Esther *topos*, see Huneycutt, 'Intercession and the High-Medieval Queen', pp. 126–46; and Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, pp. 96–98, 110–11.

his views. In defending her gender, she also defends such counsel itself as essential to governance. When she counters Solomon's claim that there are no good women, she interprets this prejudice as an instance of pride and an impediment to counsel because the man who truly seeks wisdom should not discount any adviser, should not be ashamed to learn new things, and must 'enquere of lasse folk than hymself' (ll. 1070–72). She expresses the common theme of mirrors for princes that status should be ignored in judging a counsellor, using herself as the example of that lesser but essential adviser.²⁶ Her speech also indicates how featuring a woman protagonist opens a door for the male poet: society's expectation that she validate herself as an adviser provides him the occasion to insist upon the necessity of counsel writ large.

Prudence's defence is likewise fundamental to understanding the husband-wife dynamic as a metaphor for the lord-counsellor dynamic. Melibee's protest that taking her counsel would seem to cede *maistrie* to her rightfully acknowledges the precarious power dynamic of counsel in which the lord must lower himself to take advice, which risks the appearance of weakness. Prudence points out the errors in this objection:

For if it so were that no man sholde be conseilled but oonly of hem that hadden lordshipe and maistrie of his persone, men wolden nat be conseilled so ofte. For soothly thilke man that asketh conseil of a purpos, yet hath he free choys wheither he wole werke by that conseil or noon. (ll. 1082–83)

Melibee's assumption endangers counsel of any kind, because men would never ask for counsel if it meant jeopardizing their status. Prudence's response again intersects with mirrors for princes, which often explicitly stress that even if he must submit to counsel, the decision whether to follow it always resides with the lord or king.²⁷ As she points out, counsel is not mastery: one can accept advice and permit influence without relinquishing authority. The text nuances the conception of authority, creating a space in which Prudence can rise to the level of adviser and discuss political issues without threatening Melibee's ultimate status. And it offers marriage as the analogy that proves, at least from a legal and social standpoint, that the lord/husband retains the more powerful position, since late medieval practices like *couverture* recognized the husband as the sole authority in the marriage.²⁸

²⁶ See Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, p. 47.

²⁷ Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, p. 53.

²⁸ On status within medieval marriages, see, for example, Fowler, *Literary Character*, pp. 106–11; and Leyser, *Medieval Women*, pp. 169–70.

Accordingly, when Melibee accepts Prudence's involvement, Chaucer highlights her intellectual authority yet reinforces Melibee's continued control over his decisions. Melibee interprets her advice as analogous to the 'honycombes' that Solomon declares 'yeven swetnesse to the soule and hoolsomnesse to the body', and he announces that, 'by cause of thy sweete words, and eek for I have assayed and preved thy grete sapience and thy grete trouthe, I wol governe me by thy conseil in alle thyng' (ll. 1113–14). These 'sweete words' give Melibee an intellectual, rational motive, rather than marital affection, as the cause for his submission. Further, he implicitly applies the concepts she outlined: not trusting stereotypes, accepting counsel from any source, and being willing to reverse a decision if necessary. He still retains control, though, because 'governe me' indicates reflexive *self*-restraint. Even as Melibee concedes, Chaucer emphasizes the importance of self-governance based on his evaluation of counsel, not his domination by a counsellor.

The format of Prudence's advice to Melibee illustrates the balance of power in their marital and counselling relationship, and it repeatedly models the application of accepted wisdom to immediate circumstances. Her instruction proceeds largely as a collaborative dialogue in which both husband and wife direct the discourse at times: she teaches and corrects him, and he asks her to elaborate further or clarify her counsel. She begins with general advice about choosing good counsellors, counsel to avoid, deliberation about counsel, and when it may be necessary to change counsel (ll. 1115–1231), but the text calls attention to the need to apply advice to specific circumstances through Melibee's request that she 'condescende in especial and telle me how liketh yow, or what semeth yow, by oure counseillours that we han chosen in oure present nede' (ll. 1234–35). As with Alceste before her, Prudence does not confine the range of material covered to only her initial topics; each woman illustrates how a counsellor can capitalize on the opportunity to speak in order to address various important topics and enlarge the scope of her commentary. Prudence uses her expressed topics as avenues into related matters, such as how a man should behave when asking for advice, how he should keep his preferences secret to prevent receiving bad counsel, and why he should be mindful of the end result of his actions. The dialogue also offers opportunities for the reader to collaborate in the learning process: because Prudence speaks in generalities first, the text gives readers a chance to assess Melibee's behaviours in light of her counsel and 'check their answers' against her later authoritative analysis.²⁹

Prudence's method of holding back direct criticism until Melibee asks her to evaluate his behaviours also negotiates the problematic power shift that occurs

²⁹ See also Moore, 'Apply Yourself: Learning While Reading the *Tale of Melibee*', pp. 92–93.

when a lord takes counsel. Although Melibee submits to hear her advice, she does not attack him, and when she does prepare to criticize him, she signals his continued superiority in their relationship:

'My lord', quod she, 'I biseke yow in al humblesse that ye wol nat wilfully replie agayn my resouns, ne distempre youre herte, thogh I speke thyng that yow displese. For God woot that, as in myn entente, I speke it for youre beste, for youre honour, and for youre profite eke. And soothly, I hope that youre benyngnytee wol taken it in pacience.' (ll. 1236–38)

Actions such as addressing him as 'My lord', foregrounding her humility, and beseeching him to favourably receive her counsel reinforce the established hierarchy between them before she assumes a more authoritative position. Only then does she charge, 'ye han erred' seven times in rapid succession when she explains how Melibee's council, which she describes as a 'moevyng of folye', broke nearly every guideline for requesting and receiving good counsel (ll. 1239–60). Importantly, this section clarifies that her boldest words of criticism come at his request, for his benefit, and without the intent to subvert his authority. These assurances that Melibee retains his authority carve out a position from which Prudence may redirect his attention past his rash impulses and instead toward measured advice about governance, the evils of war, the benefits of peace, and the effects of each on a lord's reputation. Her strategy proves effective, for Melibee accepts her criticism and expresses his willingness to change his counsel according to her advice (ll. 1261–63).

So far, Prudence has moved from domestic wife to political counsellor, demonstrating her ability to develop counselling authority. The next step finds Melibee authorizing her to act as his mediator with their enemies. After he accuses her of not having his best interests in mind, she makes a 'semblant of wratthe' and corrects him. He then yields, 'I shal nat konne answere to so manye faire resouns as ye putten to me and shewen. Seyeth shortly youre wyl and youre conseil, and I am al redy to fulfille and parfourne it' (ll. 1711–12). Although these lines may seem to repeat his earlier submission, they instead reveal an incremental increase in her authority. He here commits to *perform* explicitly *her* counsel, not just consider her advice in his own process of self-governance. This surrender and his ensuing consent that she may mediate with their enemies authorize Prudence to act on his behalf in a proxy position reminiscent of the authority that Gower's Peronelle assumes with her father's permission. In the *Confessio Amantis*, when the knight Petro can see no way to appease his king, he authorizes his daughter to act publicly on his behalf at court (l. 3216–18). She makes decisions that will affect them both, but she also exceeds the plan she had with Petro and successfully negotiates

her marriage to the king.³⁰ In short, once she has his authorization, she acts independently, in the sense that he no longer specifically directs her actions. Prudence similarly makes her own decisions on how to negotiate with the enemies and resolve the conflict in Melibee's favour.

Chaucer's language and the men's submissions indicate that Prudence has authority, even if it is not completely independent or permanent. Prudence meets the enemies in a 'privee place' (l. 1721) to conceal the official nature of her visit, but that does not change the fact that she makes a political negotiation as Melibee's representative. He has given her permission to do as she pleases on his behalf and placed himself 'hoolly in [her] disposicioun and ordinaunce' (ll. 1724–25). The enemies make a parallel submission when they similarly put themselves and '[their] goodes al fully in [her] wil and disposicioun' (l. 1765). To understand the power Prudence wields, it is worth scrutinizing the words by which her husband and a group of unrelated men outside of her household relinquish their masculine control to her: *disposicioun*, *ordinaunce*, and *wille*. The latter is Chaucer's addition, and, although it does not have a particularly political resonance, it has clear importance: Melibee's repeated submissions to Prudence's *wille* juxtapose her rational and peaceful will with his rash and emotional wilfulness. The measure of Melibee's reform becomes whether he is capable of aligning himself with her *wille*. *Disposicioun* and *ordinaunce* have specialized meanings in terms of government, and they indicate the import of the men's submissions to Prudence. When not referring to someone's frame of mind or to an astrological influence, Chaucer uses *disposicioun* to indicate a supreme authority, like that of the gods.³¹ Although Prudence's *disposicioun* does not rival a deity's, the use of the term nevertheless indicates that Chaucer confers on her a high level of authority. *Ordinaunce* evokes authority and government; the phrase to 'putten in ordinance' — used by both Melibee and his enemies — indicates specifically the placing of oneself under another's authority.³² Chaucer also situates Prudence's interaction with the enemies in legal contexts, for they initially cede 'oure dede and al oure matere and cause al hoolly in youre goode wyl' (l. 1741). *Cause* and *matere* can mean 'a legal action or case' and 'legal proceedings', respectively, and both terms gloss *dede* to clarify that this case constitutes an official matter, even if it occurs in private.³³ On the other hand, Prudence achieves only a limited agency — for

³⁰ See Chapter 1, pp. 49–51, above.

³¹ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. *disposicioun* (n.), defs 3, 5, 6. Compare the *Knight's Tale*, l. 2364, and *Troilus and Criseyde*, II, ll. 526–28, and V, ll. 1–2.

³² Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. *ordinaunce* (n.), def. 3a.

³³ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. *cause* (n.), def. 7; s.v.

the enemies' expressed desire to 'fulfille the wille of yow and of my lord Melibee' reminds the reader that her authority, though recognized, is not completely independent of her husband (l. 1768).

Prudence's intervention demonstrates the power of words to overwhelm and subdue, as an alternative to the violent retribution Melibee earlier desired. Her involvement seems to set up a classic case of Marian or queenly intercession, which portrays a woman's petition to a powerful man on behalf of a disproportionately less powerful person (or persons), such as the Virgin entreating God to pity humans, Philippa urging Edward III to have mercy on the burghers of Calais, or Anne persuading Richard II to mitigate John Northampton's punishment.³⁴ But these interventions emphasize a marked imbalance of power that is not present in the *Melibee*, for Chaucer neglects to clarify which party is truly weaker and whom Prudence really spares from whom. When she explains the value of peace to Melibee, she asserts that his enemies possess greater strength in their affinity and resources (ll. 1366–76); she reminds him later that, 'hire condicion is bettre than youres' (l. 1479). Melibee may think that he has more power (l. 1548), but since he has yet to show good judgement, Prudence's claims at the very least establish that his position is uncertain. Later, when Prudence confronts the enemies, *they* embrace weakness — but a specific kind, not weakness on an absolute scale — as they attempt to reach a peaceful solution. When she meets them, the narrative indicates that she echoes her speeches to Melibee on peace and war, and she scolds them for their misdeeds (ll. 1728–32). They express an inability to make the amends that Melibee may demand while he 'hath swich hevynesse and swich wratthe to us-ward by cause of oure offense', because they do not want to be 'desherited ne destroyed' (ll. 1741–51). They may still be more powerful than Melibee, for they are not concerned with war or physical injury but rather with reducing monetary sanctions so that they are not bankrupted. The enemies' solicitation of Prudence's aid constitutes less a request for intercession and more a rhetorical performance of weakness that allows them to lobby for a softer penance by abnegating any power they might have and putting

matere (n.), def. 5a(c). The three terms translate Renaud's 'nostre fait' (l. 1040), amplifying the sense of official, legal matters.

³⁴ For these accounts, see Froissart, *Chronicles*, ed. and trans. by Jolliffe, pp. 156–57, and *The Westminster Chronicle*, ed. and trans. by Hector and Harvey, pp. 92–95. Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, pp. 99–111, explores these historical cases as empowered by Marian models and examples of a specifically petitionary and supplicatory influence. For an analysis of Prudence's intervention as akin to such wifely persuasions that urge a husband to control his emotions, see Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, pp. 234–46.

it into her hands; her influence has caused them to adopt a feminized position. The resolution of the conflict resembles Alceste's prescription of a penitential role for the narrator of the *Legend of Good Women*: one who has done wrong (real or perceived) should act submissively and express humility — even if he is capable of a stronger response — if he wants reconciliation with the party who is emotionally fraught.³⁵ Similarly, the enemies submit moral superiority to Prudence and Melibee in order to preserve their position and achieve peace. By employing a female mediator and embracing feminization, they demonstrate their submission to Melibee *despite* their worldly strength.

The peaceful resolution finally rests on convincing Melibee first that he has authority and second that he must use it ethically by applying Prudence's lessons in lordship. When Prudence reports back to Melibee, her account of the negotiations presents him as securely in control and the enemies as ideally humble penitents. She assures him that they were 'ful repentant, knowelechyng ful lowely hir synnes and trespas, and [...] redy to suffren all peyne, requiryng and preiynge hym of mercy and pitee' (ll. 1770–72). She overstates the case, because the enemies are not truly willing to suffer *all* pain and punishment, as evidenced by their request not to be disinherited. Significantly, although Melibee desires peace, he also declares that he should not make the decision without holding a council to elicit 'the assent and wyl of oure freendes' (l. 1778). This council operates in opposition to his first one and demonstrates that he has reformed to follow Prudence's guidelines: he conceals his desired solution and seeks the opinions of his advisers, whom he now recognizes as only those kin, old friends, and true, wise men who exemplify ideal counsellors. When the council agrees on a peaceful resolution, Chaucer records that Prudence hears that 'the assent of hir lord Melibee, and the conseil of his freendes accorde with hire [Prudence's] wille and hire entencioun' (ll. 1791–92). The reference to her *wille* harkens back to the submission of the enemies to her *wille*, and to the emphasis that has been placed on Melibee's *wille* in much of the text. His *wille* finally merges with hers, an alignment particularly evident when he inquires whether the foes will put themselves and their punishment into 'the wyl of me and of my wyf Prudence' (l. 1815). His words not only formalize the agreement made privately between Prudence and the enemies, but they also publicly acknowledge that he shares his authority with Prudence by constructing a joint *wille* between them. Even if Melibee technically possesses more established authority because he is her lord and husband, he does not exercise it without her guidance: Prudence reshapes all of his decisions. Their joint *wille* is generalizable to political counsel, for ideally, the king and his coun-

³⁵ See above, Chapter 2, pp. 71–72.

sellors should work together to ensure that the king considers more than his own instincts in decision-making, in a balancing act that both maintains his authority and reflects the best interests of the people.³⁶

As the tale nears its conclusion, the formal, public reconciliation scene demonstrates how feminization is a subject position that can be advantageously embraced by men. Prudence, although a woman, has never been represented as physically subordinate or expressing feminine weakness; rather, she has negotiated with men from a more or less equal vantage point. By comparison, the enemies are more feminized than Prudence because, as part of their performance, they are certainly kneeling in submission, for the text indicates that, 'Melibee took hem up fro the ground ful benignely' (l. 1827).³⁷ Their words also insist upon their unworthiness and defer to Melibee's superiority: they admit their grave offences, appeal to his 'grete goodnesse and debonairetee', and submit to 'the excellence and benignitee of youre gracious lordshipe' (ll. 1816–24). Chaucer inserts additional flattery not present in the French or Latin to emphasize the enemies' attempt to persuade Melibee: 'For wel we knowe that youre liberal grace and mercy stretchen hem ferther into goodnesse than doon oure outrageous giltes and trespas into wikkednesse, al be it that cursedly and dampnably we han agilt agayn youre heigh lordshipe' (ll. 1825–26).³⁸ The enemies' actions and rhetoric constitute a scripted public display of weakness designed to signify sincere repentance and thereby secure mercy. As with the feminization of Chaucer's narrator in the *Legend of Good Women*, this feminization is not negative or permanent, but rather a temporary and pragmatic means to achieve reconciliation.

In the final analysis, Prudence's role evolves to illustrate different levels of authority. Her involvement all occurs behind the scenes, with Melibee or with his adversaries, but not as a passive petitioner or merely domestic helpmate. Chaucer defines her influence strictly as *counsel* (e.g., ll. 1109–10, 1114, 1712), elevating her beyond the role typically assigned to queenly intercessors or petitioners who often pressed upon the marital bond.³⁹ Through her counsel, Prudence earns the

³⁶ For an alternate view of Prudence's counsel as an 'advisory coup' akin to the Appellants' victories over Richard in 1388, see Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, p. 103.

³⁷ Chaucer omits the line in which they kneel, and 'pray on our knees and in tears that you may have pity and mercy upon us' (Renaud de Louens, 'Le Livre de Melibee et Prudence', ed. by Askins, p. 404).

³⁸ Staley, *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II*, pp. 190–91.

³⁹ See, for example, Philippa's plea to Edward III on behalf of the Calais Burghers: 'Now I humbly beg you, for the Son of Blessed Mary and *for the love of me*, to have mercy on these six men' (Froissart, *Chronicles*, ed. and trans. by Jolliffe, p. 157; emphasis mine).

status to negotiate with the enemies without Melibee's supervision and act as a political agent. Her lasting role may perhaps best be described as 'continued adviser'. Once her role as mediator is complete, Melibee still needs her guidance in political decision-making. When he realizes the power he could exercise to punish his enemies, he considers confiscating their goods and exiling them forever, which Prudence identifies as a 'cruel sentence and muchel agayn resoun' — an irrational misuse of power (l. 1836). As an alternative, she suggests that he must 'overcome [his] herte' (l. 1858) to avoid being ruled by his emotions and losing his reputation. She next urges him to 'lat mercy been in [his] herte' (l. 1867). After so much counsel, Melibee's 'herte gan encline to the wil of his wif, considerynge hir trewe entente', and he consents to have mercy on the enemies (ll. 1871–72). Yet the evocation of the heart is not, or at least not exclusively, a reference to marital love. Rather, it represents a more general call to rule his heart well. After all, the recent council of male allies emphasized receiving with 'good herte his adversaries to foryifnesse and mercy' (ll. 1790), and Prudence's quotations show that Solomon himself enjoined the ideal ruler to reject 'hardynesse of his herte' and 'over-hard an herte' (ll. 1318, 1694–95), and to value 'lordshipe of his owene herte' over physical force (ll. 1511–16). Instead of persuading him by love, Prudence appeals to morality and reason to encourage Melibee to exercise the stereotypically feminine quality of mercy and thereby conform to the image of a proper ruler.⁴⁰ Far more than the site of amorous love, the heart constitutes the location of all emotions, including mercy. Whether the counsellor is male or female, in the heart of the ruler rests both the problem of unbridled emotions and the solution of mercy.

While Prudence models behaviours a wife could follow to gain authority or persuade her husband toward moral virtues, she also exemplifies good counsel more generally. The problem that her gender initially presents for political counsel demonstrates that she is trapped within but also enabled by humanly created gender and social hierarchies in the sense that, as a woman, she poses minimal threat to masculine authority. Through her, Chaucer recommends a feminized persona as a useful counselling position. It may seem incongruous that a male writer would encourage a man to adopt a feminine persona, but Chaucer would not be unique to do so: that seems to be the thrust of Albertano's original recommendations to his son. By focusing on the marital relationship and the wife's role, Chaucer restores attention to the counselling relationship (rather than focusing on the

⁴⁰ Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, pp. 96–99, points out that Melibee's concessions result from a sense of morality and reason, and argues that Melibee succeeds by adopting feminine virtues.

political aspect of the counsel itself as Renaud had). Crucially, the conclusion of the *Melibee* resolves the conflict with the enemies, but it never resolves the issue of Sophie's health and the family's personal crisis. In omitting Melibee's inquiry about Sophie's status and the physicians' assurances of her convalescence, Chaucer follows his French source's alterations to Albertano's text, but doing so also means that the tale ends while Prudence occupies the status of counsellor, not domestic helpmate or mother. Melibee surrenders authority to Prudence by degrees, but Chaucer never relegates her back to the least authoritative of her positions.

Contextualizing Prudence's Advice

When Prudence instructs Melibee, she generates authority by citing proverbs, Scripture, theologians, and classical authorities on ethics and politics. On the surface, some of her usages seem problematic or contradictory, such as when she responds to the same passage warning against ceding *maistrie* (attributed to Solomon) in two different ways. Yet proverbs themselves are notoriously contradictory because they are meaningless in the abstract; they depend on the context to which they are applied for meaning.⁴¹ For instance, 'He who hesitates is lost' and 'Hurry is the mother of mistakes' openly contradict each other; neither is always right nor always wrong, but each could be correct depending upon the moment of utterance. The problem with proverbs, advice, and stereotypes is fundamentally one between the universal and particular, the very same issue Prudence must address to persuade Melibee to reject antifeminist beliefs in order to accept her as a counsellor. The defence of her gender becomes the first of many surprising or contradictory moments that exposes the necessity of interpreting universal wisdom to determine whether it applies to particular instances. Prudence's advice to Melibee is useful for its content, but it is equally important for the process that she models, which teaches readers strategies for interpretation and reminds them that the universal assumptions that underpin any advice must be applied to specific circumstances.⁴² Her use of proverbs and authoritative citations indicates that ultimately, all authority is dependent on context, because even statements by the most

⁴¹ On this quality of proverbs, see Yankah, 'Do Proverbs Contradict?', pp. 128–40; and Bradbury, 'Transforming Experience into Tradition', pp. 275–80.

⁴² See also the complementary claim by Moore, 'Apply Yourself: Learning While Reading the *Tale of Melibee*', pp. 83–97, that the point of Melibee's ignorance is to instruct the reader more fully. For a view of *Thopas* and *Melibee* as a game that exposes the interpretation and manipulation of language by both author and audience, see Waterhouse and Griffiths, "'Sweete wordes" of Non-Sense (Part II)', pp. 53–63.

revered thinkers may not be 'authoritative' if deployed in the wrong situations. Her process illustrates the fluidity of all authority and reflects the sliding nature of counsel that requires one to evaluate context when giving or receiving advice.

Prudence deploys and interprets proverbs based on her immediate rhetorical needs, a practice that sometimes leads to the illusion of contradiction. An oft-cited 'contradiction' demonstrates how seemingly antithetical broad claims are actually reconcilable in their specific contexts. Early on, Prudence warns Melibee 'Make no felawshipe with thyne olde enemyes', so that he does not introduce old foes into his circle of advisers (l. 1189). Later, she appears to reverse course by encouraging him to reconcile with his present enemies: 'I conseilte yow that ye accorde with youre adversaries and that ye have pees with hem' (l. 1675).⁴³ In context, however, before the first claim, she acknowledges that reconciliation does not equal trust or friendship: 'For sikerly, though thyn enemy be reconsiled, and maketh thee chiere of humylitee, and lowteth to thee with his heed, ne trust hym nevere' (l. 1187). Making 'felawshipe' implies camaraderie and a close relationship, and it must be distinguished from encouraging a peace treaty. After all, before she urges reconciliation, Prudence outlines the damaging consequences that vengeance can bring to Melibee and his subjects (ll. 1467–1517, 1648–71). She aims to promote peace and safety, not 'felawshipe' with their current enemies. She models a consistent pragmatism that relies on careful word choices and the interpretation of her words within their narrative context.

There is also one passage that Prudence refutes twice over the course of the narrative, demonstrating how proverbs may be deployed in different circumstances and also that advice must be reinterpreted with each usage to identify its immediate relevance. First, when Melibee objects that hearing Prudence's counsel would give her *maistrie* over him, he attributes this general warning to Solomon:

Nevere in thy lyf to thy wyf, ne to thy child, ne to thy freend ne yeve no power over thyself, for bettre it were that thy children aske of thy persone thynges that hem nedeth than thou see thyself in the handes of thy children. (ll. 1060)⁴⁴

She counters this citation not through contradiction but instead by applying it to the specific context of giving and receiving counsel. By definition, she argues, the lord always has the option to reject proposals, so hearing advice does not

⁴³ Walling, "In Hir Tellyng Difference": Gender, Authority, and Interpretation', pp. 164–65, similarly defends the integrity of Prudence's counsel on these matters. For treatment of Prudence's advice as contradictory, see Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, pp. 95–98, and Kempton, 'Chaucer's Tale of Melibee: "A Litel Thyng in Prose"', p. 268.

⁴⁴ The source for this citation is actually Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 33. 19–20, 22.

amount to ceding *maistrie*, and the proverb does not apply (ll. 1081–82). Yet she paraphrases the same proverb when she asks the enemies to put themselves at Melibee's mercy:

'Certes', quod Prudence, 'it is an hard thyng and right perilous that a man putte hym al outrely in the arbitracioun and juggement, and in the myght and power of his enemys. For Salomon seith [...] "ye peple, folk and governours of hooly chirche, to thy sone, to thy wyf, to thy freend, ne to thy broother ne yeve thou nevere myght ne maistrie of thy body whil thou lyvest"' (ll. 1754–56)

Revealing the dangers of submission might seem to undermine her purpose, but instead, she thoughtfully anticipates a valid general concern, which she shows to be irrelevant by assuring the enemies of Melibee's virtues: 'And natheles I conseille you that ye mystruste nat my lord, for I woot wel and knowe verraily that he is debonaire and meeke, large, curteys, and nothyng desirous ne coveitous of good ne richesse. For ther nys nothyng in this world that he desireth, save oonly worshipe and honour' (ll. 1759–62). She then promises that she will also help persuade Melibee to a peaceful reconciliation (ll. 1763–64). Without denying the proverb's potential to be true sometimes, Prudence shows in both specific instances that it poses a distinctive barrier to peace and must be disregarded.

Furthermore, the recycling of this particular proverb impacts what *maistrie* means in the text. Used initially between Melibee and Prudence, *maistrie* may simply echo the marital power struggles within various *Canterbury Tales*. The second usage, in reference to Melibee and the enemies, however, presses beyond the husband and wife dynamic to highlight the political struggle for power and authority. As Scanlon has argued, by restraining his desire for revenge or *maistrie* over his foes and by yielding authoritative agency to Prudence, Melibee paradoxically attains *maistrie* when the enemies submit to him.⁴⁵ Similarly, this conclusion reflects back on the first usage and Prudence's authority to counsel. Because she never threatens her husband's superior position as lord or seeks a domineering *maistrie* over him, Prudence achieves an authoritative status through her advice and negotiations.⁴⁶ Melibee's reaction to her gender introduces the register of *maistrie* and power in the tale, but *maistrie* ultimately refers to a political concept of authority addressed through the husband and wife dynamic. Prudence's actions exemplify what men equally might accomplish if they follow her feminized model for what are typically men's roles in advising and negotiation.

⁴⁵ Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority and Power*, p. 215.

⁴⁶ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v., *maistrie* (n.), def. 1c.

In addition to applying advice to particular contexts, Prudence also exercises creative licence in reinterpreting the terms and concepts presented in proverbs, particularly when she seeks to correct Melibee's views. Reinterpretation becomes another means to avoid contradicting or challenging the authority of either Melibee or authoritative proverbs. For example, in their collaborative dialogue, she asks him to evaluate the physician's recommendation, 'that in maladies that oon contrarie is warisshed by another contrarie' (l. 1277). Melibee responds, 'that right as they [the enemies] han doon me a contrarie, right so sholde I doon hem another' (l. 1280). He assumes that both instances of *contrarie* signify a hostile or violent act, the first of which will be reciprocated in an 'eye for an eye' vengeance.⁴⁷ Prudence's interpretation depends on a different definition of *contrarie*: the initial offence may be amended only by the precise opposite action, such as remedying wickedness with goodness, war with peace, or discord with accord (ll. 1285–90).⁴⁸ Both interpretations of *contrarie* are plausible, but Prudence argues that the statement's context should not allow for the multiplication of hostile acts. Her alternative reading requires consideration of the healers' pledge 'to doon to every wight honour and profit, and no wight for to anoye [cause trouble]' (ll. 1269–70). The surgeons initially voiced this vow to do no harm, and the physicians agreed (ll. 1012–17), but to advocate vengeance violates the Hippocratic oath. Prudence's reinterpretation draws on the physicians' occupational obligations even if it does not represent their original intent.⁴⁹ Prudence amends the physicians' own contradictory statement and models the deliberation and interpretative skills necessary for a counsellor (or ruler).

On a larger scale, Prudence also models a more complex redefinition of concepts through selective proverbs that allow her to advise Melibee without explicitly calling him misguided. The most notable case occurs when she redefines his passion for vengeance as a weakness and patience as his greatest strength. As Jill Mann has persuasively demonstrated, this reversal of typically masculine and feminine qualities feminizes Melibee in a positive sense because it promotes peace.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. *contrarie* (n.), def. 2.

⁴⁸ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. *contrarie* (n.), def. 1.

⁴⁹ Walling, "In Hir Tellyng Difference": Gender, Authority, and Interpretation', pp. 166–67, has shown that this reinterpretation mirrors the common occurrences in any collection in which maxims are detached from their original utterances. In fact, this reinterpretation is not so far removed, because it draws on the physicians' confirmation of their Hippocratic oath.

⁵⁰ Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, pp. 95–98. See also Crocker, *Chaucer's Visions of Manhood*, pp. 36–46, who focuses on Prudence as an allegorical character and makes the complementary point that the tale stresses that femininity, figured through Prudence's advice, is an essential component of ideal masculinity.

Importantly, Prudence carefully frames this gender reversal without insulting his masculinity, so that feminization paradoxically emerges as the only viable option for demonstrating true strength. When she comments on the distribution of power between enemies, Melibee dismisses the failure to avenge himself as weakness that invite future attacks: 'If I ne venge me nat of the vileynye that men han doon to me, I sompne or warne hem that han doon to me that vileynye, and alle othere, to do me another vileynye' and 'also for my suffrance men wolden do me so muchel vileynye that I myghte neither bere it ne susteene' (ll. 1461–62, 1464). Her rebuttal presents three general scenarios: you foolishly battle one who will defeat you; you shamefully battle a weaker man; or if you are evenly matched, then war is peril for both parties (ll. 1481–84). However, her proverb selections steer Melibee toward the value of peace because they support only the distribution of power in which he is militarily weaker: she first refers to Seneca and Cato, who both warn that if a more powerful man attacks, one must suffer it and be patient to avoid further perils (ll. 1485–90).⁵¹ She then turns to proverbs that advocate patience to counter Melibee's view of patience as weakness:

For Salomon seith that 'the doctrine and the wit of a man is knowen by pacience'. And in another place he seith that 'he that is pacient governeth hym by greet prudence'. And the same Salomon seith, 'The angry and wrathful man maketh noyses, and the pacient man atempreth hem and stilleth'. He seith also, 'It is moore worth to be pacient than for to be right strong; and he that may have the lordshipe of his owene herte is moore to preyse than he that by his force or strengthe taketh grete citees'. (ll. 1512–16)

Through Solomon's words, Prudence extols patience as the measure of reason, prudent self-governance, and a man's true worth, since patient strength deserves more praise than 'to be right strong' or achieve forceful conquest. Although she argues that Melibee is weaker than his enemies, she redefines political strength as based in moral virtue and offers him the opportunity to overcome his enemies through the exercise of patient self control. She thus transforms the discussion of military power into a call for a different, vastly superior potency.

Confirmation that Prudence exemplifies a broader model, not simply an eloquent wifely counsellor, comes at arguably her most seemingly contradictory moment: when she makes her 'semblant of wratthe', which appears to break from

⁵¹ A similar technique underpins her discussion of finances, in which she cites authorities on riches and poverty, then stresses emphatically the sad state of poverty for someone who loses his riches, and finally cautions against the unwise expense of maintaining a war (*Melibee*, ll. 1551–1655).

her otherwise rational persona.⁵² Throughout her advising, Melibee has been willing to listen, but when she explicitly tells him to reconcile, he balks and attacks her motivations: ‘now se I wel that ye loven nat myn honour ne my worshiþe’ (l. 1681). In his view, he will lose honour if he initiates reconciliation with enemies who have not sought it, and he accuses her of wanting him to ‘meke me, and obeie me to hem, and crie hem mercy’ (l. 1684). Although he did not object to her redefinition of patience as strength or her claim that unity and peace are the highest goods (l. 1678), he fails to understand that her encouragement toward patience and humility is motivated by the paradoxical desire to strengthen his lordship. His assumption that she calls for a disavowal of his masculine authority provokes her famous ‘semblant of wratthe’ (l. 1687) and the reassertion of her commitment to his reputation:

Certes, sire, sauf youre grace, I love youre honour and youre profit as I do myn owene, and evere have doon; ne ye, ne noon oother, seyn nevere the contrarie. And yit if I hadde seyde that ye sholde han purchaced the pees and the reconsiliacioun, I ne hadde nat muchel mistaken me ne seyde amys [...] And the prophete seith, ‘Flee shrewednesse and do goodnesse; seke pees and folwe it, as muchel as in thee is.’ Yet seye I nat that ye shul rather pursue to youre adversaries for pees than they shuln to yow. For I knowe wel that ye been so hard-herted that ye wol do no thyng for me. And Salomon seith, ‘He that hath over-hard an herte, atte laste he shal myshappe and mystyde.’ (ll. 1688–96)

Her display of wrath allows for a role reversal in which Melibee can adopt the conciliatory persona to counter her anger and recognize his own folly.⁵³ But it also initiates a discussion that allows their marital relationship to be analogized to a lord-counsellor one. Prudence corrects Melibee and evokes their marital bond as an acknowledgement that his honour affects her status, too, but her activity is distinct from examples of queens who evoke loving relationships to persuade their husbands. Even her references to Melibee’s heart do not enjoin him to act out of love, because any sentimental attachment is supplanted immediately by Solomon’s assurance that hardheartedness leads to misfortune. Her lesson echoes prior advice that ‘he that thurgh the hardynesse of his herte and thurgh the hardynesse of hymself hath to greet presumpcioun, hym shal yvel bityde’ (l. 1318), part of a warning that Melibee should not be overconfident in his strength and opinions. Prudence’s repeated theme points attention away from romanticized

⁵² For the claim that Prudence is inconsistent, see, for example, Waterhouse and Griffiths, “Sweete wordes” of Non-Sense (Part I), p. 354.

⁵³ Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, pp. 243–46.

love or spousal affection to the broader moral claims that support her perspective on appropriate political behaviour.

Melibee's response likewise invokes love only to universalize a rational motivation for his concession. After attempting to excuse his frustrations, he submits,

But seyeth and conseileth me as yow liketh, for I am redy to do right as ye wol desire; and if ye reprove me of my folye, I am the moore holden to love yow and to preyse yow. For Salomon seith that 'he that repreveth hym that dooth folye, he shal fynde gretter grace than he that deceyveth hym by sweete wordes'. (ll. 1702–05)

He changes his mind not because he loves her; rather he loves her because she reproves his folly. His choice of proverb again mitigates any amorous undertones by foregrounding a logical interpretation of their exchange. It acknowledges the inherent ambiguity of language by using the concept of 'sweete wordes' as the antithesis to Prudence's moral 'sweete wordes' that first convinced him to hear her counsel (ll. 1113–14).⁵⁴ 'Sweete wordes' may be used to deceive or benefit the hearer, and Melibee clearly identifies Prudence's purpose as distinct from deceit. Her mode of persuasion is therefore primarily rational, even when she seems to make an irrational show of anger, and her effectiveness derives not solely from her spousal role but more importantly from her skill in using proverbial wisdom effectively.⁵⁵

That Prudence ultimately functions as an exemplar relevant to men as well as women counsellors becomes clear in her approval of Melibee's interpretation of her *semblant*. She explains:

I make no semblant of wratthe ne anger, but for youre grete profit. For Salomon seith, 'He is moore worth that repreveth or chideth a fool for his folye, shewyng hym semblant of wratthe, than he that supporteth hym and preyseth hym in his mysdoynge and laugheth at his folye'. And this same Salomon seith afterward that 'by the sorweful visage of a man' (that is to seyn by the sory and hevy contenance of a man) 'the fool correcteth and amendeth hymself'. (ll. 1706–10)

For the first time, she concurs with Melibee, echoing through Solomon her husband's assessment that her feigned anger meant to reprove his folly. The second

⁵⁴ See also Waterhouse and Griffiths, "Sweete wordes" of Non-Sense (Part II); pp. 56–57, for the alternate view that this exchange raises questions about Prudence's character and advice.

⁵⁵ It is interesting to note that both Prudence and Melibee introduce each citation of an authority with 'as Seneca seith' or 'For Salomon seith'. The word choice collapses the distinctions between oral and textual authority to give the illusion that famed thinkers are participating in the debate. It also positions the speaker as an authority by virtue of his or her ability to apply meaningful citations to the current circumstances.

proverb, which states that the serious man's visage teaches the fool to imitate him, seems less applicable to this moment: Prudence showed anger not to encourage Melibee to imitate her supposed fury, but rather to bring him back to his senses. Yet there is another purpose for its inclusion that points back to exemplarity. Solomon's concept of a fool correcting himself by imitating another person maps clearly onto Prudence's activities and calls attention to her role: she mirrors for Melibee the patience, prudence, and deliberation he must adopt to amend his rule. The exchange between Prudence and Melibee also foregrounds the couple as exemplars for readers. Prudence's *modus operandi* has been to illustrate the ethical application of advice by providing general counsel and then applying it to Melibee's specific case. Now, both characters reflect on their particular positions and then generalize to a universal position — the precise kind of allegoresis that authors perform on exemplars. They effectively allegorize each other as wise counsellor and formerly foolish prince, a move that makes them available to readers as points of identification not only for wife and husband but also for counsellor and lord.

Overall, the tale presents wise counsel on lordship, provides the authoritative citations that could be useful to a counsellor, and offers an exemplar for feminine traits that are vital to the success of a counsellor, especially when dealing with a resistant pupil like Melibee. Prudence's success at attaining the authority to counsel him and to negotiate peace imagines a form of authority that is fluid, ever dependent upon fluctuations in the power dynamics that change according to how she, Melibee, and the enemies interpret their circumstances. But her effectiveness does not mean that Chaucer champions spurious manipulations of authoritative texts or perspectives — unlike the Wife of Bath's appropriations of authorities' words, Prudence does not seek to contradict or blithely mishandle her predecessors' claims. Chaucer emphasizes her intent to protect Melibee, his reputation, and their subjects. As a result, he depicts her rhetorical performance as praiseworthy; even the enemies' possibly exaggerated weakness is pragmatic and motivated by reconciliation. Of course, in the real world, there is always the chance of malicious manipulation or feigning, but fictionalized exempla like the *Melibee* imagine the ideals that might be possible in the real world if all parties were to act according to virtue and morality.

For all the reminders that she is Melibee's wife, Prudence's persuasion is not based exclusively in her spousal relationship, so a male counsellor could adapt her rhetorical and hermeneutic strategies to reason with his superior. By figuring the lord-counsellor relationship as one between husband and wife, the *Melibee* crystallizes counsel as a collaborative action that never threatens the lord's authority. And although Chaucer's framework attempts to distract from explicitly politi-

cal readings, the tale nevertheless resonates with contemporary political crises. During Richard's reign, no shortage of aristocrats might have benefited from its counsel toward peace, patience, and self-governance — scholars have suggested Richard, the Lords Appellant, and John of Gaunt, among others, as plausible recipients for the *Melibee's* particular advice.⁵⁶ Yet the metaphor that a functional counselling relationship resembles an ideal marriage would also be an appropriate message to the same elite audiences, especially given the legislations that sought to control or eliminate counsel and criticism during Richard's reign.⁵⁷ For instance, the 1379 reaffirmation of the *scandalum mandatum* declared treasonous any speech critical of peers; there were laws against speech that was considered disrespectful of those in power; and the specific statute of 1386 made the penalties for counselling the king equal to the standard punishments for treason, including death.⁵⁸ The *Melibee's* strategic representation of submissive but active counsel argues for a shift in the methodology of counsel in light of such contemporary restrictions: rather than accept a silent and powerless position, would-be advisers should embrace Prudence's rhetorical moves in order to safely provide counsel to those who need it. By focusing on Prudence's character, the *Melibee* creates a space in which counsel can operate, as it instructs political advisers to present themselves as deferential, humble, and invested in the king's good, which enables the delivery of vital counsel on lordship.

New Contexts for the Melibee and the Monk's Tale

As for any text excerpted from its original collection and recontextualized by later compilers and collectors, manuscript evidence for the *Melibee* reveals how scribes and readers could have engaged Chaucer's complex tale outside its origi-

⁵⁶ See Staley, *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II*, pp. 190–91; Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, pp. 99–104. On the political potential of the *Melibee* as a response to current events, see Yeager, "Pax Poetica": On the Pacifism of Chaucer and Gower, pp. 114–21; Stillwell, 'The Political Meaning of Chaucer's Tale of Melibee', pp. 433–44; and Askins, 'The *Tale of Melibee* and the Crisis at Westminster', pp. 103–12.

⁵⁷ That crises of counsel and concerns about the king's self-governance characterized Richard's reign is evident; see McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century*, pp. 424–91, and Saul, *Richard II*, pp. 148–204, 435–38.

⁵⁸ For the statute of 1386, see *The Westminster Chronicle*, ed. and trans. by Hector and Harvey, pp. 167–75. For more detailed discussion of such restrictions, see Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, pp. 31–35; and Grudin, *Chaucer and the Politics of Discourse*, pp. 20–25.

nal *Canterbury Tales* context.⁵⁹ Most manuscripts present the complete tale or an abridged version without any original text or commentary, but San Marino, Huntington Library, MS HM 144 demonstrates a fascinating rereading of Chaucer's *Melibee* and *Monk's Tale* in light of attitudes toward prudence and fortune that were significant in mirrors for princes and that, more importantly, gained traction in the mid-to late fifteenth century.⁶⁰ The Chaucerian texts are called *Proverbis* (*Melibee*) and *The Falle of Princis* (*Monk's Tale*); they lack attribution to Chaucer and do not contain his Prologues. Instead, in an original endnote that replaces the *Monk's Prologue*, the scribe forges a deliberate opposition between Prudence's advice and faith in Fortune:

They that this present & forseide tale
have or shal Reede: Remembyr the no-
ble proverbis. that rebukyth Covetise
and Vengeaunse takyng. in truste of
ffortune. whiche hathe causyd many
a noble Prince to falle. as we may rede
of them here folluyng. (HM 144, fol. 99^r)⁶¹

This endnote asserts the importance of active reading and remembering, and it draws a correlation between Prudence's advice and political success, between 'noble proverbis' ignored and the failings of leaders. In essence, the scribe constructs the *Proverbis* as a mirror for princes and *Melibee* as an exemplar who, by heeding Prudence, avoids the disastrous tragedies of the exemplars in the *Falle of Princis*. Of course, this yoking of a mirror for princes with a *de casibus* may have been Chaucer's original intent, but, if so, he remains playfully ambiguous about the connection.⁶² By contrast, the HM 144 scribe makes explicit the tales'

⁵⁹ For similar studies that explore new contexts for Chaucer's works, see Doyle, 'Thisbe Out of Context', pp. 231–61, and McDonald, 'Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, Ladies at Court and the Female Reader', pp. 22–42.

⁶⁰ See Manly and Rickert, *The Text of the Canterbury Tales*, II, pp. 371–92, for the *Melibee*'s manuscript history.

⁶¹ I have silently expanded abbreviations and regularized u/v distinctions for ease of reading. I have retained the manuscript punctuation, capitalization, and line divisions (for poetry and the endnote); square brackets indicate other emendations. On this text, see also Harris, 'Unnoticed Extracts from Chaucer and Hoccleve', p. 188; and Mosser, 'Manly and Rickert's Collation of Huntington Library Chaucer Ms HM 144 (Hn)', p. 239.

⁶² Chaucer's *Prologue to the Monk's Tale* features Harry's domestic reading of the *Melibee* followed by an invitation to 'let us passe away fro this mateere', and a request that the Monk 'be myrie of cheere' in his tale (ll. 1891–1925), all of which separate the *mateere* of the two tales.

potential as political counsel. His original endnote demonstrates an astute reading of Chaucer, but it also shows signs of influence by advice to princes literature and specific fifteenth-century political discourses. A literary reading of this idiosyncratic, abridged *Melibee* therefore evidences a fascinating hermeneutic circle whereby literary and historical topics crucial to later audiences sharpen the political thrust of the two Chaucerian tales.

HM 144 is a suitable subject for such analysis because collations of three of its major texts have shown that the single scribe exercises an editorial sensibility in abridging, glossing, and compiling his texts; he is a knowledgeable, thoughtful participant in literary culture.⁶³ As a whole, the collection focuses more on Christian morality than politics *per se*, but the reframed versions of the Chaucerian tales depend on a political reading of the *Melibee* as a mirror for princes for didactic effect. The HM 144 manuscript essentially constitutes a broadly moral anthology or manual for good living. It was produced near the end of the fifteenth century, not before 1482, although the manuscript may have been completed after the turn of the century. Little is known of the scribe, except that he also produced Oxford, Trinity College MS D 29, an eclectic collection including extracts from John Trevisa's translation of the *Polychronicon*, John Mandeville's *Travels*, Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, and Chaucer's *Melibee* and *Parson's Tale*, among others; the intended audiences for Trinity D 29 and HM 144 are unknown.⁶⁴ HM 144 is fascicular and, as Ralph Hanna has argued, resonant with bookshop productions, which readers or scribes might compile into early anthologies, although it also demonstrates a sustained interest in the preachment and homiletic discourses, which might point to

Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority and Power*, pp. 215–27, identifies the *Melibee* and *Monk's Tale* as part of Chaucer's engagement with mirrors for princes and the juxtaposition of lay with clerical authority. In San Marino, Huntington Libr., MS HM 144 the scribe's linking supports Scanlon's broader analysis of the tales as political education.

⁶³ See Harris, 'Unnoticed Extracts from Chaucer and Hoccleve', pp. 167–200, on the Chaucerian pieces, and Marx, 'Beginnings and Endings', pp. 70–81, on the *Gospel of Nicodemus*. I intend the term 'scribe' to signify an active sense of editor and compiler, rather than the passive sense of copyist, following Lerer, 'Rewriting Chaucer', p. 311, n. 3. There is unfortunately no new evidence to the unknown scribe's identity or the site of the manuscript's production, and I do not seek to challenge the codicological analysis or collation expertly presented by Harris, 'Unnoticed Extracts from Chaucer and Hoccleve', pp. 183–200. Rather, I provide an alternate interpretation of the scribe's efforts.

⁶⁴ Harris, 'John Gower's "Confessio Amantis"', pp. 31–32, and Harris, 'Unnoticed Extracts from Chaucer and Hoccleve', pp. 167–68; as Harris explains, both manuscripts use Caxton's 1482 edition of the *Polychronicon* as a source and could not have been completed before that date.

monastic origins.⁶⁵ We simply cannot definitively ascertain the manuscript's origins without more evidence than is presently available, but we can nevertheless analyse its fascinating engagement with late medieval morality through literature.

The contents suggest that the volume as a whole can be classified as a manual for both spiritual and worldly virtues. Quires 1–7 contain religious material including William Lichfield's *Compleynthe betwene God and Man*; a selection from Lydgate's *Life of Our Lady*; a revised version of the *Complaint of Our Lady*; a revised version of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*; excerpts from Trevisa's *Polychronicon* (selections on the life of Pilate, the lineage of Mary, Judas and the apostles, and the martyrdom of John the Baptist); and the *Stations of Jerusalem*, with eighty verses from the *Magnificat* of Lydgate's *Life of Our Lady* inserted. These works emphasize major events of salvation history; they also indicate the scribe's penchant for excerpting, editing, reframing, and combining texts.⁶⁶ To these religious meditations, the remaining quires 8–12 add instructions for functioning in the world, with Chaucer's texts as the fulcrum between spiritual and worldly morality. The remaining literary entries are broadly moral: Benedict Burgh's *Distichs of Cato*, Lydgate's *The Churl and the Bird*, Lydgate's *Horse, Goose and Sheep* (with five unidentified extra stanzas), two stanzas excerpted from *The Pageant of Knowledge* and *Tyed with a Line* known as 'Halsham's Ballad', and a stanza that appears in both *The Court of Sapience* (stanza 67) and George Ashby's *Active Policy of a Prince* (stanza 99) lamenting worldly ills and the lack of virtues such as pity, mercy, and charity.⁶⁷ The final entries in the

⁶⁵ Hanna, *Pursuing History*, p. 304, n. 3. As Hanna observes, booklet manuscripts, even if compiled by the purchaser, could be copied in a single hand (p. 142). On anthologies, see Boffey and Thompson, 'Anthologies and Miscellanies', pp. 279–315. Harris, 'Unnoticed Extracts from Chaucer and Hoccleve', p. 167, presents an alternative view of the manuscript as a monastic production because of the scribe's glossing and homiletic impulses. The manuscript binding was reinforced with strips taken from an Augustinian Priory at Bisham Montague, but that is not necessarily evidence of its production there. Even were it produced at Bisham, that would not preclude the scribe taking an interest in political topics because of Bisham's location just west of London on the Thames and its close patronage relationship with the prominent Neville family, including Richard Neville 'The Kingmaker' Earl of Warwick and Salisbury, whose family vault was at Bisham. Nor would ties to Bisham negate the possibility of an external audience for the manuscript material; the contents would have supported the commitment by Canons Regular to minister to laypeople.

⁶⁶ Marx, 'Beginnings and Endings', pp. 77–80.

⁶⁷ Bühler, 'Lydgate's Horse, Sheep, and Goose', pp. 563–69, observes that the unidentified additions to *Horse, Goose, and Sheep* also appears in Caxton's first edition and proposes that the poem was copied from Caxton; Bühler prints all additional stanzas and suggests that the final stanza (from Ashby or the *Court of Sapience*, fol. 145^v) is in a different hand, but it contains the same idiosyncratic letter forms that characterize the main hand. In private conversation after

manuscript record times of sunrise and sunset for each month of the year, including a short selection from the *Polychronicon* on the same topic.⁶⁸

The scribe exhibits familiarity with a variety of religious and secular texts, with a particular recurrence of Lydgatean material. Of the secular texts, the *Monk's Tale* and works copied from Caxton's editions of Burgh and Lydgate demonstrate few significant changes; the *Melibee* receives the scribe's primary editorial attention. The comprehensive picture of the manuscript suggests an interest in not only religious discourse but also worldly morality and proverbial wisdom as driving forces behind the scribe's revisions to the *Melibee*. Certainly, the secular literature of HM 144 advises people how to maintain spiritual morality and worldly stability, which may be a reflection on the social upheaval that occurred during and after the Wars of the Roses, the usurpation of the throne by Richard III, and the accession of Henry VII.⁶⁹ With leaders choosing and sometimes changing sides (and taking their armies with them), as the Earl of Warwick famously did, it stands to reason that stabilizing one's position would be an attractive prospect.

The new contextualization for the *Melibee* illustrates the scribe's response to Chaucer's works that developed alongside shifts in perceptions of kingship and statecraft in the mid-fifteenth century. During the reign of Henry VI, the king's office faced tangible threats by Yorkist challengers to the throne who claimed that they could promote the common good better than Henry, who seemed to lack an 'independent royal will'.⁷⁰ In response to the instability of political circumstances, prudence, depicted as a pragmatic political wisdom that promotes stability, becomes a key feature in literary and historical writings about statecraft.

microfilm consultation, Kathryn Kerby-Fulton confirms my analysis that although the ink and script size are different, the hand is the same.

⁶⁸ For further details on San Marino, Huntington Libr., MS HM 144, see Manly and Rickert, *The Text of the Canterbury Tales*, I, pp. 291–93; Dutschke and others, *Guide to Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the Huntington Library*, pp. 197–203. In addition, I consulted the unpublished library notes by Malcolm Parkes and others, courtesy of the Huntington Library.

⁶⁹ On the turmoil and impact of the wars, see Carpenter, *The Wars of the Roses*, and Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, II: c. 1307 to the Early Sixteenth Century (1996), pp. 249–87. It is worth noting that political counsel and critique remained dangerous matters: the Statute of Treason was invoked a number of times to punish treasonous imagination in oral or written speech, including political verse; such sanctions led to the violent deaths of John Holton for writing bills against Henry VI in 1456 and of Wyllyam Collyngbourne in 1484 for a mere couplet deriding Richard III and his advisers. See Bellamy, *The Law of Treason*, pp. 102–76; Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century*, p. 21; and Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, p. 34.

⁷⁰ Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship*, pp. 56–63 and 195–99, at p. 199, assesses the young king's dependence on his lords to exercise the authority that should have been his.

For instance, Henry VI's minority council named his lack of prudence — his inability to judge what was best for his people — as grounds for continuing to restrict his authority in 1434. And in 1449 to 1450, a parliamentary petition from the commons urged upon Henry the 'conservation of his peas, kepyng of Justice and due execution of his lawes, withouten which no Roialme may long endure in quyetie nor prosperite'.⁷¹ The language and concepts here echo themes of mirrors for princes and evoke values analogous to meaningful elements of the *Melibee*, where only the voice of Prudence prevents her husband from seeking dangerous vengeance and threatening the welfare of his people. Of course, the end of the Civil Wars did not assure political stability, since Richard III's problematic accession and subsequent defeat by Henry VII followed. Even during the 1530s, some twenty years after taking the throne, Henry VIII still imagined the Wars as ongoing and had any potential rivals put to death.⁷² In addition to this general political volatility, the fifteenth century witnessed a number of kings not formally trained for the office (but rather educated as any other nobleman) — Henry IV, Henry V, Richard III, and Henry VII, most of whom gained it by conquering a predecessor.⁷³ The broad political instabilities from the late fifteenth through the early sixteenth century makes the dissemination of vernacular advice literature like that found in HM 144 all the more necessary, not only to advise princes and the aristocrats who counselled them but also to help other audiences grapple with royal turnover, the changing political circumstances, and fear for their own worldly positions.

HM 144's Chaucerian texts fit directly within trends in late medieval aristocratic advice literature that evolved to stress the stabilization of the king's rule in response to England's changing political concerns and unpredictable circumstances.⁷⁴ The yoked mirror for princes and *de casibus* resemble Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* (1431–38/39) in title and methodology, suggesting potential influence.⁷⁵

⁷¹ *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, v, p. 200, quoted in Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship*, p. 58.

⁷² Carpenter, *The Wars of the Roses*, p. 258.

⁷³ Hicks, *English Political Culture in the Fifteenth Century*, pp. 35–36.

⁷⁴ Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship*, pp. 39–51, characterizes in detail the shift, due to the impact of the Civil Wars, from literary texts like mirrors for princes that advise the king to practise moral virtues to works that warn him how to defend himself from competitors, protect himself from treason, and maintain his royal position.

⁷⁵ Of course, the scribe may have merely offered an unimaginative description of the Monk's content, but the choice classifies the text within the politicized moral genre of Lydgate's extremely popular work, and Lydgate was a source for both religious and secular material in the manuscript. If the scribe were monastic, as Harris has suggested, Lydgate would be a fitting analogue for a monastic writer invested in political topics.

Lydgate's *de casibus* narratives and accompanying envoys merge the fifteenth-century impulse to warn against losing power with a mirror text's advice on virtuous behaviour, which distinguishes him from his sources. Boccaccio's *De casibus* used exempla to warn against trusting worldly success or fickle Fortune and to advocate placing faith in religious ideals instead; in contrast, Laurent de Premierfait's translation insisted that people are culpable for their own downfalls; Lydgate's view incorporates elements of both prior perspectives by offering a view of Fortune as wilful, malevolent, and responsible for bringing low both the deserving and the innocent.⁷⁶ That is, Lydgate's text reflects two conflicting perspectives on Fortune: one, that she is unstable, and two, that sinners fall.⁷⁷ The sustained emphasis on Fortune as a threat to the blameless and guilty alike raises a vexing question: how might people combat her? The answer derives from the structure of Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*, which imagines that men can control Fortune through wise choices. Unlike Boccaccio's *De casibus* or Chaucer's *Monk's Tale*, which primarily lament the tragic falls of rulers who trusted unstable Fortune, Lydgate's moralizing envoys generate a moral lesson from each narrative. The *Fall of Princes* exemplifies an emergent poetic tradition that responds to political uncertainty by teaching readers to arrest Fortune's wheel by practising virtues such as fortitude, temperance, justice, and prudence that are antidotes to Fortune and may forestall her influence upon the prince.⁷⁸

In general, the notion that human agency is efficacious underpins all princely advice manuals. Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, influential on Lydgate and other fifteenth-century writers, bluntly asserts that man is 'His oghne cause of wel and wo', and exposes that 'That we fortune clepe so | Out of the man himself it growth' (Prol., 546–49). As Maura Nolan observes, such claims identify Fortune as early as the late fourteenth century as 'a cultural shorthand — a useful figure for a nexus of ideas about historical causality, contingency, and human agency'.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ See Mortimer, *John Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, p. 183, on Lydgate's distinctions from his sources.

⁷⁷ See the extended discussion of Lydgate's conflicting views of Fortune by Nolan, 'Lydgate's Literary History', pp. 86–92.

⁷⁸ Strohm, *Politique: Languages of Statecraft Between Chaucer and Shakespeare*, pp. 2–5, 87–104, at p. 96. Strohm identifies a number of works by Fortescue, Pecock, Yorkist poets, and anonymous writers as evidence of this emergent tradition. For examples of Lydgate's foregrounding of virtues, see Lydgate, *Fall of Princes*, ed. by Bergen, 6, ll. 246–300, where Lydgate (in the voice of Bochas) urges the reader to find stability in the four cardinal virtues and reject Fortune's domination.

⁷⁹ Nolan, 'The Fortunes of *Piers Plowman*', p. 4.

Such warnings against falling victim to Fortune take on further urgency amidst the instabilities of the fifteenth century, when writers urged the princely reader to practise moral and political virtues not simply to be a good ruler but rather to maintain his status against the threat of challengers. Indeed, the hybrid, politicized genre that characterizes Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* is not unique. His 'Disguising at London' also combines *de casibus* strategies with the mirrors for princes genre in order to assert that Prudence and other virtues may aid a prince in his worldly pursuits (not just as spiritual virtues) and may allow him to resist Fortune's attacks; Lydgate emphasizes the tragedy of the eventual death of even those monarchs who otherwise seem to resist Fortune, both celebrating the possibility of forestalling Fortune and acknowledging the problem that even the savviest ruler must fall eventually.⁸⁰ Further, other fifteenth-century authors explored troubling social and political questions regarding authority, sovereignty, and political responsibility, including George Ashby, John Fortescue, Reginald Pecock, and various anonymous writers.⁸¹ Like Gower, these authors associated responsibility for tragedies not with capricious Fortune but with the actions of the ruler, and the dominant critical perspective asserts that an astute leader can benefit from or even master Fortune through the exercise of reason and virtue.⁸²

The Huntington *Proverbis* evidences a similar reaction to Fortune: if responsibility resides with the ruler, then his actions affect his reign, and Prudence's advice is crucial to preventing, or at least postponing, his demise. By joining the *Melibee* and the *Monk's Tale*, the scribe constructs an escape from arbitrary Fortune by positing a cause and effect relationship: princes fall because they ignored good advice. He thereby asserts that the stability of rule or worldly position is determined by whether or not one heeds prudent counsel, as Melibee does, not by Fortune. He reframes Chaucer's works to expose Fortune as a metaphor for bad choices in order

⁸⁰ Nolan, *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture*, pp. 147–52.

⁸¹ For example, Fortescue, *Governance of England*, ed. by Plummer, pp. 351–53, writes an early draft of the *Governance* in favour of the Lancastrians but acknowledges the weaknesses of Henry's council and finances. Ashby, *Poems*, ed. by Bateson, *Active Policy of a Prince*, advises his reader to think of his future and, for his own protection, suppress conspirators, subdue any hint of rebellion, eliminate pretenders to the throne, and refuse to trust stories without evidence (ll. 380–83, 388, 415–21, 618–24). Such writings evidence political instability and the view that the king must take responsibility for his fortunes as ruler. For more detailed readings of Ashby, Fortescue, and others, see Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship*, pp. 40–51, and Strohm, *Politique: Languages of Statecraft Between Chaucer and Shakespeare*, pp. 133–69, 171–203.

⁸² See Strohm, *Politique: Languages of Statecraft Between Chaucer and Shakespeare*, pp. 2–4; see also my discussion of similar ideas in Gower, in Schieberle, 'Controlling the Uncontrollable', pp. 86–95.

to underscore the necessity of remembering Prudence's proverbial wisdom and exercising good moral judgement to prevent tragedy. Of course, this view discounts radical contingency, the notion that bad things can happen to moral people, which appears in Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* exemplars such as Hercules, Oedipus, Samson, Lucretia, and King Arthur, among others.⁸³ The Huntington scribe's perspective, while ultimately incomplete, nevertheless creates a comforting fantasy in which a reader may be motivated to morality because it supposedly assures worldly security.

What study of HM 144 adds to the history of conduct literature is evidence of the widespread appeal of exempla and princely conduct literature as didactic modes. That there is no sign that the manuscript was directed toward a specific noble or aristocrat does not preclude a broadly political reading of the Chaucerian tales. Political references to rulers and reigns were frequently used as metaphors for morality and self-rule, as in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, which exploited the possibilities for a mirror for princes to offer ethical advice to multiple levels of society.⁸⁴ More specifically, in the fifteenth century, vernacular mirrors were available to anyone who could afford them: the period witnessed a growing appetite for conduct literature among non-aristocratic readers, and formerly 'aristocratic' texts were being appropriated for new and socially mobile audiences hungry for instruction in noble behaviours.⁸⁵ The HM 144 scribe may not invoke political wisdom to teach explicitly the regulation of a kingdom, but he sees the depiction of prudent wisdom and rulers felled by Fortune as useful in teaching moral values and ethical processes to any audience. That is, he reads the *Melibee* as princely advice in order to use the *Monk's Tale's* princely falls to motivate readers to apply the valuable lessons contained in the *Melibee* and throughout his compilation. While the spiritual benefits of practising the morality offered in the religious texts of the manuscript should be obvious, the Chaucerian pieces and secular texts that follow offer reminders of why prudent moral behaviours are beneficial in the world, too.

'Remember the noble Proverbis': Reading HM 144

A number of critical editorial changes streamline the *Proverbis* text to focus on Prudence's advice, while also encouraging the reader to independently assess Melibee's choices. As Kate Harris has demonstrated, the scribe forges a smooth,

⁸³ See Mortimer, *John Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, pp. 212–13.

⁸⁴ Porter, 'Gower's Ethical Microcosm and Political Macrocosm', pp. 135–39.

⁸⁵ A number of essays in Ashley and Clark, *Medieval Conduct*, provide evidence of non-aristocratic readers' desires to appropriate noble manners and increase their social status.

coherent text that eliminates repetitive examples in support of a single argument, deletes matter specific only to Melibee's personal predicament, and promotes monologue by Prudence over dialogue between her and Melibee as the main didactic method.⁸⁶ The tale is abridged, but there are no major changes to the 'plot' or the substance of Prudence's advice. Harris argues that the scribe's interest in 'anatomizing sins', his additions ascribed to 'the boke' (the Bible), and the marginal Latin notations of biblical passages indicate that 'the preachment [...] is the staple of his literary experience' and shaped his editorial principles.⁸⁷ Yet this does not preclude an investment in political theology, that is, the arguably political discourses that formed the backbone of princely advice literature by aligning Christian morality with ethical politics.⁸⁸ The scribe's omissions and original endnote also draw the reader into evaluating Melibee and the *Monk's Tale* princes as exemplars and, therefore, into contemplating Prudence's advice as a means to combat Fortune. The scribe's alterations force readers to analyse the characters in a politicized context, suggesting that his guiding principles have been to reframe Chaucer's material within views of Fortune and specific moral virtues crucial to fifteenth-century advice to princes literature.

Removing the body of material that addresses Melibee's specific circumstances universalizes Prudence's advice and articulates more general political theory to readers who do not share Melibee's exact position.⁸⁹ However, the scribe also excises Prudence's judgements of Melibee's actions, which means that the *Proverbis* proceeds as a point-by-point analysis of what good rulers must do, instead of an authoritative critique of Melibee's mistakes. For example, the scribe deletes her assessment of Melibee's counsellors, her criticism of the men who advocated vengeance, and her specific doubts about Melibee's ability to exact revenge (cf. *Melibee*, ll. 1241–60, ll. 1341–92).⁹⁰ He retains Prudence's gen-

⁸⁶ Harris, 'Unnoticed Extracts from Chaucer and Hoccleve', pp. 190–93.

⁸⁷ Harris, 'Unnoticed Extracts from Chaucer and Hoccleve', pp. 195–99.

⁸⁸ For the connection of theological and political discourses, see Genet, 'Ecclesiastics and Political Theory in Late Medieval England', pp. 23–44; and my Introduction, above, especially pp. 5–6, 9–10.

⁸⁹ Harris, 'Unnoticed Extracts from Chaucer and Hoccleve', pp. 191–95, lists unique omissions in detail. I skip over the scribe's relatively minor abridgements, such as streamlining Melibee's first counsel to align him specifically with the young, rash warmongers by reducing the number of speakers who support vengeance from many, varied types to only one young fellow. Instead I focus on those alterations that impact the larger reading of the two Chaucerian tales as exemplary didactic texts.

⁹⁰ For convenience, I have cited Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Benson. When material

eral advice for how one ought to hold a council and who should be counsellors (HM 144, fols 85^r–88^v), but he omits her eight assertions to Melibee that 'ye han erred', which directly criticize his previous failures. He likewise eliminates her further emphatic charge that 'ye han greetly erred' by accepting flatterers, old enemies, and young men as counsellors (*Melibee*, l. 1353). He never defends Melibee or suggests that he has not committed mistakes; instead, he leaves the reader to determine whether Melibee made effective decisions. In subduing Prudence's authoritative critique and leaving the reader to interpret how Melibee's behaviours fell short of Prudence's lessons, the scribe creates a need for the reader to become more involved in generating the tale's meaning.

These 'ye han erred' lines are often foundational to reading Prudence as either an authoritative woman or as an allegorical figure, so their absence is striking.⁹¹ Their omission changes the relationship between Melibee and Prudence but does not reduce her authority, because the scribe presents her advice primarily as an authoritative, unquestioned monologue. For Chaucer, their counselling relationship was a collaborative exchange and a marital ideal, but the Huntington scribe abridges Melibee's role greatly and eliminates most of the dialogue on political topics. For instance, once the *Proverbis* Melibee fails to give the proper deliberation on the subject of contraries (HM 144, fols 88^r–89^r; *Melibee*, ll. 1279–82), Prudence does not give him the opportunity to disappoint again. Melibee does not speak for some one hundred and thirty-five lines, as Prudence lectures on different aspects of a lord's proper decision-making process that the scribe has cobbled together from Chaucer's dialogue.⁹² The scribe elevates Prudence's authority by casting her as the dominant speaker and removing Melibee's alternative, erroneous readings.

Because the scribe excises much of Melibee's involvement, the material he retains is important. Melibee's interjection that breaks Prudence's HM 144 monologue corresponds to the scribal endnote's juxtaposition of Prudence and

appears in both Chaucer and San Marino, Huntington Libr., MS HM 144, I provide references to both texts. For the manuscript collation against Hengwrt, consult Harris, 'Unnoticed Extracts from Chaucer and Hoccleve', pp. 177–99.

⁹¹ See Pakkala-Weckström, 'Prudence and the Power of Persuasion', pp. 403–05; Burnley, *Chaucer's Language and the Philosophers' Tradition*, pp. 49–52; and Staley, 'Inverse Counsel: Contexts for the *Melibee*', p. 142.

⁹² For example, the scribe completely skips Prudence asking Melibee to interpret advice about how to guard his house, followed by Melibee's misreading and a mild admonishment (*Melibee*, ll. 1331–36). Instead Prudence forges ahead from the previous topic to skip to her correct interpretation, introduced by 'Also ye shul understond þat', to elide the gap (San Marino, Huntington Libr., MS HM 144, fols 89^v–90^r; see *Melibee*, ll. 1337).

Fortune. When Prudence argues that institutional punishment is preferable to vengeance, Melibee interrupts to express faith in Fortune, and the HM 144 lines differ slightly:

'A', quod Melibeus, 'this vengeance likyth me no thyng. I bethenk me now & take heed how ffortune hath norisshid me fro my childhode & hath ho[l]pen me to passe many a strayt passage. Now wil I *asshe* he[r] þat she shal, with goddis help, helpe me my shame for to venge'. 'Certis', quod Prudence, 'yf ye wil wirke be my counseil ye shul not *assaye* ffortune be no maner way nor lene ne bowe unto here'. (HM 144, fol. 91^r, emphasis mine)

'A', quod Melibee, 'this vengeance liketh me no thyng. I bithenke me now and take heede how Fortune hath norissid me fro my childhede and hath holpen me to passe many a stroong paas. Now wol I *assayen* hire, trowynge, with Goddes help, that she shal helpe me my shame for to venge'. 'Certes', quod Prudence, 'if ye wol werke by my conseil, ye shul nat *assaye* Fortune by no wey, ne ye shul nat lene or bowe unto hire'. (*Melibee*, ll. 1444–48, emphasis mine)

The HM 144 scribe reintroduces Melibee's voice to highlight how Prudence actively seeks to dispel his trust in Fortune and redirect it toward following her counsel. Hengwrt, other manuscripts of the *Tales*, and, consequently, the *Riverside Chaucer* record forms of 'assayen' where HM 144 presents a small variation that presents first 'asshe' (a variant of *asken*) and then 'assaye'.⁹³ The *Proverbis* Melibee thinks he can 'ask' or 'require' that Fortune help him while Prudence interprets the same action as 'testing' Fortune, who may fail him, something Melibee does not seem to recognize.⁹⁴ Prudence establishes her counsel as the alternative to placing oneself at Fortune's unstable mercy. Although these lines appear in Chaucer, their content has impacted the scribe's reading: his endnote that contrasts 'the noble proverbis' with 'truste of ffortune' promotes Prudence as an antithesis to Fortune (fol. 99^r) and embraces more fully the allegorical level in which Prudence and Fortune are at odds. However, the scribe does not focus on the two women

⁹³ Manly and Rickert, *The Text of the Canterbury Tales*, vii, p. 357, show only one other manuscript with this variation, Oxford, Bodl. Libr., MS Rawlinson Poetry 149, which is not one of the two manuscripts affiliated closely with San Marino, Huntington Libr., MS HM 144; those close relatives are BL, MS Harley 838 and Oxford, Bodl. Libr., MS Laud misc. 600 (Manly and Rickert, *The Text of the Canterbury Tales*, ii, p. 401). On these manuscripts see also Harris, 'Unnoticed Extracts from Chaucer and Hoccleve', p. 180 n. 23. Even if his exemplar were defective, 'asshe' and its implied uncertainty had to occur to this meticulous scribe as a viable reading. I have added modern punctuation.

⁹⁴ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. *asken* (v.), defs 1, 5, and s.v. *assaien* (v.), def. 2a.

themselves as combative personifications but instead on the reader's obligations as a student and moral agent. He urges the reader to 'Remembryr the noble proverbis' (and presumably apply them), and he asserts that taking actions while trusting Fortune 'hathe causyd many | a noble Prince to falle', pointing forward to the *Falle of Princis's de casibus* narratives (fol. 99^r). This causal link between proverbs ignored and the deaths of leaders invites readers to meditate on how Prudence's advice can prevent disastrous tragedies: the *Proverbis* provides a theory of morality, and the *Falle of Princis* illustrates failures to put her advice into practice.

Specifically, the endnote condenses the lessons of the *Proverbis* to the inhibition of two primary actions, which provides evidence of the material the scribe must have found particularly meaningful for contemporary readers. He claims that Prudence's proverbs rebuke 'Covetise and Vengeaunce taking', perhaps not the conclusions all readers draw from Chaucer's tale (fol. 99^r). Avoiding vengeance is obviously a central component and doubtless relevant to the post-Wars of the Roses milieu. However, covetousness seemingly plays a smaller role in the *Melibee*, since Chaucer mentions covetousness only three times: 1) as one of three impediments to good decision-making — 'ire, coveitise, and hastifnesse' (*Melibee*, ll. 1122, 1129–32; HM 144, fol. 85^{r-v}); 2) in Prudence's critique that Melibee brought 'ire, coveitise, and hastifnesse' into his council (*Melibee*, ll. 1246–48; HM 144 omits); and 3) in her promise to the enemies that Melibee is 'debonaire and meeke, large, curteys, and nothyng desirous ne coveitous of good ne richesse' (*Melibee*, ll. 1759–61; HM 144, fols 96^v–97^r). The last reference may be the most important, because Prudence's assurance that Melibee is virtuous and not covetous convinces the enemies to submit to his judgement. By foregrounding the rejection of 'covetise' in the endnote, the scribe directs his readers to see it as central to Melibee's success and as behaviour to imitate (lest they overlook this critical lesson, since he omits Prudence's explicit argument against covetousness at *Melibee*, ll. 1246–48).

The scribe's focus likely derives from contemporary concerns in literary texts about covetousness as a form of self-interested ambition that was damaging the realm. Lydgate points toward the divisive dangers of covetousness and ambition in *The Serpent of Division* (1422), in which Rome falls 'also sone as fals covitise brought Inne pride and vayne ambicion' (p. 49, l. 27), and in *The Siege of Thebes* (1421–22), where he blames mankind's need to dominate and oppress others on 'coveytise and fals Ambicioun' (ll. 4672–85).⁹⁵ Similar warnings against greed appear in George Ashby's *Active Policy of a Prince* (c. 1460s) and John Fortescue's

⁹⁵ On *The Serpent of Division*, see Nolan, *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture*, pp. 33–70, and Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century*, pp. 138–40.

Governance (c. 1471–76), where the destructive effects of covetousness on the realm represent widespread problems that must be dealt with for the government and kingdom to operate successfully. For Ashby, many of the realm's woes might have been avoided if there had been 'counseil without coveitise' (l. 175) and if the king 'devoided had folke covetous | From his personne' (ll. 191–92); he equates covetousness with 'subtel treason' (l. 200). Such criticism targets subjects' 'coveitise', the ambitious and greedy self-interest that replaced loyalty and allegiance to the king and country; rather than blame the king, Ashby and his contemporaries reasoned that the ruler's morality was unable to function while he was surrounded by covetous counsellors and government agents.⁹⁶ These works lament covetousness not only in leaders but also in subjects, employees of the crown, and counsellors to the king. Thus, the *Proverbis* endnote identifies a problematic vice that writers saw as pervasive throughout late fifteenth-century England and seeks to supersede it with virtuous values that the scribe markets as specifically effective at stabilizing a prince's reign.

One final change indicates the scribe's creation of a further parallel between the fallen princes and Melibee. HM 144 presents a slightly revised version of the famous stanza introducing tragic falls as the result of Fortune's flight:

I wil biwaile in maner of tregede
 The harme of hem þat stod in heigh degre
 And fallen so ther is no remedie
 To brynge hem oute of her adversite
 Ffor certenly when fortune lust to flee
 Ther may no man þe cours of her wel holde
 Let no man trust in blynd prosperite
 Beth ware by these ensamplis *yonge* and olde.
 (fol. 100^r, emphasis mine)

The scribe initially copied but struck out *trewe* from the final line and replaced it with *yonge* as an interlinear correction. As the magisterial study of all known manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* by John Manly and Edith Rickert notes, *yonge* is not an uncommon replacement for *trewe* here; yet HM 144 is the only instance of *yonge* as an interlinear correction, and the substitution does not appear in the manuscripts otherwise most closely related to HM 144.⁹⁷ Therefore, although the scribe's replacement is not unprecedented, it most likely represents his purposeful deviation from his exemplar. In effect, he reinterprets the line about examples

⁹⁶ Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship*, pp. 40–42.

⁹⁷ Manly and Rickert, *The Text of the Canterbury Tales*, vii, p. 474.

'trew and olde' — tried and true — in two possible ways. He either identifies the exemplars as young and old, or he asserts that readers, whether young or old, should learn from these examples. This alteration reflects his sustained attempt to place the *Falle of Princis* in conversation with the tribulations and education of 'A yong man callyd Melibeus' (81'; *Melibee*, l. 967). The substitution also reminds the reader, regardless of his age, that both the young and old may fall victim to Fortune's snares.

There are very few other changes to the *Monk's Tale* in the HM 144 *Falle of Princes*, and, indeed, the major difference is the framework that encourages readers to see flaws in the exemplars. In the *Monk's Tale*, Chaucer's narrator neglects to address the faults of many men who are presented as innocent victims of Fortune's wheel, such as Julius Caesar, Pedro of Cyprus, Holofernes, and Ugolino of Pisa. His treatment of Nero may be the most interesting in light of the *Melibee*, for although the Monk ignores Nero's wickedness, he accentuates in three stanzas Nero's rejection and murder of Seneca followed by the claim that his fall occurred when 'Fortune liste ne lenger | The hye pride of Nero to cherice' (*Monk's Tale*, ll. 2519–20). Especially after Melibee's eventual embrace of Prudence's wisdom, which often cites Seneca, readers should be prepared to interpret Nero's actions as grievous errors. In light of the HM 144 endnote, it is also plausible to see Nero as an anti-Melibee whose refusal to hear wisdom puts him at Fortune's mercy. 'Obstinacy in the face of wise counsel', as Scanlon puts it, characterizes not only Nero but also Nabugodonosor, Balthasar, and Croesus.⁹⁸ Other exemplars recall the HM 144 endnote's warning against covetousness and vengeance, since, for example, the Monk explicitly categorizes Croesus's fall as the result of setting his heart on vengeance (*Monk's Tale*, l. 2742). Although the Monk omits Ugolino's machinations to take control of Pisa, with some knowledge of history, the reader could easily interpret his tragedy as the result of his ambitious covetousness, arguably a fault that could be applied to any of the emperors or conquerors, even Hercules and Alexander, who otherwise seem to be innocent of major flaws. The Monk repeatedly blames Fortune, but there are hints that the exemplars' flaws and other human agents ultimately caused these tragedies, as in his treatment of Julius Caesar that laments his defeat of Pompey and thereby raises questions about Caesar's rise to power (*Monk's Tale*, ll. 2687–94). The HM 144 framework magnifies all such defects that remain only implied in Chaucer's original.

By blending the *Proverbis* with the *Falle of Princis* through the endnote, the scribe imposes causality upon the fallen, even the innocent victims, as if seeking to rationalize their ruin. He invites readers to seek more complex readings

⁹⁸ Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority and Power*, p. 226.

of circumstances and search for possible shortcomings in the leaders, rather than accepting the familiar refrain that Fortune lies in wait to overthrow the unsuspecting and innocent. Fortune becomes simply the opposite of prudence, and exemplars' misfortunes appear as the logical and inevitable results of moral failings. The scribe overlooks the concept of contingency to promote a simpler understanding of tragedy: trusting in Fortune may cause a prince to fall, but listening to Prudence may spare him. His perceptive reading is probably aided by familiarity with Lydgate's work. Like Lydgate, he encourages the fantasy that by adopting moral virtues, his pupils might forestall misfortune, bringing Chaucer's works into the same context as mirrors for princes and other fifteenth-century writings that propose that human efforts can combat Fortune. At the same time, the scribe breaks with the literary *de casibus* tradition that extolled Poverty as Fortune's foe.⁹⁹ In HM 144, embracing Prudence's advice, not Poverty, allows man to combat the capriciousness of the world while also maintaining his temporal status. The replacement of Poverty with Prudence may acknowledge the growing desire for conduct manuals across the literate strata of society; wealthy or upwardly mobile audiences might be more likely to embrace Prudence than Poverty.¹⁰⁰ Regardless of the intended audience, in this manuscript, for all his initial flaws, Melibee becomes the unmistakably successful counterpart to the *de casibus* failures.

The enjoinder to 'Remembyr the noble proverbis' accentuates a lesson relevant not only to Prudence's advice but also to the worldly wisdom contained in the rest of the manuscript. The first seven quires are indisputably religious, but after the Chaucerian pieces, the texts become more generally moral with an emphasis on proverbs and practising moral virtue in the world. Both the *Distichs of Cato* and *The Churl and the Bird* advocate a perspective in which wisdom and virtue prepare a person to avoid misfortunes or reduce his worldly suffering. Although these texts appear to echo their Chaucerian predecessors in the manuscript order-

⁹⁹ In the Boethian mode, Poverty opposes Fortune (Book II, pr. 5 and Book III, pr. 3). Boccaccio and Lydgate likewise feature Poverty as an antidote to Fortune. For a concise summary of Fortune in Boethius, Boccaccio, Ricardian poets, Lydgate, and the Findern Manuscript, see Nolan, 'The Fortunes of *Piers Plowman*', pp. 1–5; for a more detailed account of the medieval figure of Fortune and her classical history, see Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna*, pp. 8–34.

¹⁰⁰ Ashley and Clark, *Medieval Conduct*, pp. ix–xx, explain how fashionable conduct manuals began to break down traditional boundaries and teach 'gentle' behaviours to non-aristocratic audiences. If Hanna, *Pursuing History*, p. 304, n. 3, has correctly identified San Marino, Huntington Libr., MS HM 144 as a 'cheap bookshop production', then it would have been accessible to such audiences.

ing, their more recent views plausibly could have shaped the scribe's responses to Chaucer, since the quires could have been copied in any order and then assembled. Burgh's *Distichs of Cato* stresses universalized virtues at the same time that it offers more practical instructions for demonstrating wisdom in the care of one's household and neighbourly relationships. It also shares with the revised Chaucerian tales the common themes of self-governance, prudence, and foresight as means to prevent misfortune.¹⁰¹ The scribe's marginal notes indicate his interest particularly in foresight: alongside Burgh's instruction to the reader to 'perceive that after wol folle', so that foresight will prevent or ease misfortunes, the scribe has written, 'Remembyr bef[ore] what wyl f[all]' (HM 144, fol. 124^r).¹⁰² This comment reconfigures foresight as an act of remembering in a move that recalls his warning to 'Remembyr the noble proverbis'. Retaining prudent advice and behaving accordingly become acts of foresight. The next item, Lydgate's *Churl and the Bird*, clarifies that, once armed with wisdom and proverbs, only an ignorant and hopeless churl would react without deliberation and lead himself into misery.¹⁰³ Like its preceding secular texts, the *Churl and the Bird* asserts the value of using wisdom to avoid misfortune of one's own invention.

The remaining literary items also convey common themes broadly related to the content of the *Proverbis* and *Falle of Princis*. Lydgate's *Horse, Goose and Sheep* stresses peace and warns against pride and covetousness; five stanzas added to it echo the *Distichs*' advice about finances, self-governance, and moderation in appetite and speech. The two stanzas known as 'Halsham's Ballad' search for fleeting security in the mutable world: the first laments worldly instability and that nothing made of the four elements 'Maye endure stable and persevere in aby-dyng', whereas the second complains about the speaker's failure to find stability and his estimation that he is tied, powerless, to 'fortune or Infortune' (fol. 145^v). The final literary stanza of the manuscript bemoans the lack of virtuousness in the world, as if there is little hope of remedy. These stanzas give voice to the speaker's

¹⁰¹ Both *Magnus Cato* and *Parvus Cato* are copied, although these themes best characterize the *Magnus Cato*.

¹⁰² Cf. *Parvus Cato Magnus Cato*, ed. by Burgh, Caxton, and Jenkinson, fol. 17^r; San Marino, Huntington Libr., MS HM 144 has been cropped, but the meaning of the marginal note is still clear.

¹⁰³ The premise of Lydgate's poem is that, in exchange for her freedom, a captured bird teaches a churl three lessons that include exercising reason, logic, and prudence. Once free, she tests him by telling him a fanciful story of the riches he could have had if he had kept her. When he believes her and berates himself severely, she explains how he has foolishly failed to apply her three proverbs and understand that her story was not true.

concerns about contingency and his desires for certainty, control over his existence, and avoidance of misfortune. This moment of doubt constitutes a turning point at which the reader must either accept or reject the contingency lamented. The bulk of the manuscript has provided substantial instruction in methods for counteracting the speaker's anxieties, so if the reader heeds the scribe's advice and remembers the 'noble proverbis' issued from the Chaucerian texts forward, he has, at least in theory, a way to exercise control of his fortunes after all.¹⁰⁴

The Huntington Manuscript thus stands witness to a hermeneutic circle in which post-Chaucerian literature influences this late medieval scribe's interpretation of Chaucer. His reframing changes and editorial interventions present the *Melibee* as a mirror for princes, and one that, moreover, conveys attitudes that gained increasing currency after Chaucer's death. Most notable is the elevation of Prudence to a quasi-personified status as the opposite of Fortune. Yet as much as the scribe's constructed monologues cast her as an unquestionable authority, he preserves Melibee's objection that she cannot counsel because of her gender, and he retains references to her womanhood elsewhere. Perhaps these moments maintain a tie to the literal world to acknowledge that there are real effects of Melibee's decisions, just as there are real effects for the *Monk's Tale* rulers. But there may be another reason to retain the gendered terms of the tale. A final prayer appears at the end of the literary selections, as if to answer the doubt in the last stanzas and remind the reader of the solutions advocated by both the religious and secular portions of the manuscript: 'prayour & good lyvyng: may withdrawe alle bad predestinacion. & bothe man and woman may stonde in the state of grace. Amen' (HM 144, fol. 147^v). The prayer evokes man's free will to choose virtuous living and mitigate the effects of 'bad predestinacion', that is, misfortune.¹⁰⁵ Strikingly, the scribe records both 'man' and 'woman', rather than allowing 'man' to stand in for all mankind. This prayer supports a reason for maintaining Prudence's tie to literal gender that may not be too far afield from Harry Bailly's interpretation:

¹⁰⁴ The last texts in the manuscript record the hours of daylight during each month, and the *Polychronicon* entry on seasonal hours of daylight for Britain and other areas. These may seem at odds with the rest of the manuscript, but they respond to a need for a different kind of practical preparedness to negotiate the world.

¹⁰⁵ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v. *predestinacioun* (n.), defs a, b. The prayer does not necessarily emphasize works above grace or deny God's foreknowledge, for theologians have long suggested that although good deeds do not merit salvation (which would preclude God's grace), they constitute man's positive response to the possibility of grace; see Halverson, *Peter Aureol on Predestination*, pp. 76–108; and Hornbeck, *What is a Lollard?*, pp. 31–40.

to provide a female model for worldly morality. The only other human exemplars for women in the manuscript are Mary, Mary Magdalene, and the other witnesses to the passion and resurrection, who model religious practices such as the meditation on Christ's sacrifice for mankind in the *Complaint of Our Lady*.¹⁰⁶ Acknowledging women in the final prayer imagines them as a plausible audience that might benefit from reading or hearing the anthology's texts. If the scribe perceived the compilation's contents as relevant to both genders, then, as Melibee's wife and trusted adviser, Prudence is the only female exemplar of secular morality. Even though he clearly finds her most significant as the counsellor whose advice counters faith in Fortune, he nevertheless leaves open her connection to literal womanhood and her potential as a model for women audience members.

¹⁰⁶ The selections from the *Life of Our Lady* feature the only debate among the four allegorical daughters of God, not the Virgin herself.

MALE 'TRANSLATORS' IDENTIFICATION WITH WOMEN: THE *EPISTRE OTHEA* IN MIDDLE ENGLISH

Othea, selon grec, peut estre pris pour sagece de femme [...] et comme yceulz [les ancians] eussent coustume de toutes choses aourer qui oultre le commun cours des choses eussent prerogative d'aucune grace, plusieurs femmes sages qui furent en leur temps appellerent deesses. Et fu vraye chose, selon l'istoire, que, ou temps que Troye la grant flourissoit en sa haute renommee, une moult sage dame, Othea nommee [...] lui [Hector] envoya plusieurs dons beaulx et nottables.

Christine de Pizan, *Epistre Othea*, Ch. 1, ll. 73–96

Othea uppon the Greke may be taken for the wisdom of man or woman [...] And as [ancient pepill of olde tyme] hadde a custom to wurschip all thing the which above the comune course of thinges hadde prerogatif of some grace, many wise ladies in theire tyme were called goddesses. And trewe it is, aftir the storie, that in the tyme that grete Troie florisschid in his grete name, a full wise lady callid Othea [...] sent hym [Hector] many grete and notable yiftis.

Stephen Scrope, *Epistle of Othea*, p. 6, l. 18–p. 7, l. 4¹

Christine de Pizan's *L'Epistre Othea la deesse, que elle envoya a Hector de Troye quant il estoit en l'age de quinze ans* (*The Letter of the Goddess Othea which She Sent to Hector of Troy when He Was Fifteen Years Old*) (1399–1400) and the fifteenth-century translations by Stephen Scrope (c. 1440) and the anonymous producer of the *Lytil Bibell of Knyghthod* (c. 1450) provide evidence that

¹ Citations of Christine de Pizan, *Epistre Othea*, ed. by Parussa, contain chapter and line number; translations are my own unless otherwise noted. Citations of Scrope, *The Epistle of Othea*, ed. by Bühler, and *A 'Lytil Bibell of Knyghthod'*, ed. by Gordon, contain page number and line numbers; for the Middle English texts, I have modernized distinctions between *i/j* and *u/v*.

men might productively identify with a female authority figure, whether that be Christine or Othea her fictional adviser (or both). There are also correspondences between Christine's women counsellors and those who gently but authoritatively instruct a prince in Gower and Chaucer, although there is no evidence she knew their work. The representations of wise women in Christine's exempla are crucial to understanding how the defence of women against antifeminist stereotypes and the promotion of feminized counsel work hand in hand. The *Othea* is particularly instructive when read alongside the works of Christine's male English counterparts because, although it is easy to believe that she identifies with wise women counsellors, it seems more difficult to accept that a male writer might identify with a woman character. Examining the *Othea* reveals that the male writers in this study engage in strategies strikingly similar to the ones Christine uses to develop Othea as a means to communicate important political advice to powerful audiences.

The epigraphs' explanations of Othea's character demonstrate the potential gendered tensions that arose in a male poet's translation of the *Othea*. Scrope renders 'sagece de femme' as 'wisedome of *man or woman*' (my emphasis). One might see his inclusion of both genders as minimizing the existence of a specific feminine wisdom or authority in an attempt to reimagine feminine traits in Christine's work as the property instead of masculine subjects.² Yet he then closely translates her mythographic reading of Othea as one among many wise pagan women mistaken for goddesses. Certainly he appropriates Christine's womanly quality of wisdom for his sex, but he does not deny women's access to wisdom in the process. The inclusion of 'man' here should be taken as evidence of Scrope's attempt to insert himself into the fiction and to use Othea as an authorizing device just as Christine herself has. Othea challenges antifeminist stereotypes to promote women as valuable and authoritative advisers. Her voice becomes inextricably linked with Christine's, since both women share identical goals, and Christine generates authority by placing herself in a longstanding tradition of female counsellors such as Othea and the Cumaean Sibyl.³ A similar

² On such gender differences in Scrope, see Chance, 'Gender Subversion and Linguistic Castration', pp. 164–69; Mahoney, 'Middle English Regenderings of Christine de Pizan', pp. 407–09; Summit, *Lost Property: The Woman Writer and English Literary History*, pp. 73–74; and Warren, *Women of God and Arms*, pp. 72–74.

³ For Christine's regular identification with Sibyls as authorizing figures, see Fenster, 'Who's a Heroine? The Example of Christine de Pizan', pp. 116–19; Margolis, 'Christine de Pizan', p. 361; and Brownlee, 'Structures of Authority in Christine de Pizan's *Ditié de Jehanne d'Arc*', pp. 131–50. Although tradition places the Tiburtine Sibyl as Augustus's adviser, Green, 'Philosophy and Metaphor', pp. 120–25, observes that selecting the Cumaean Sibyl, who, like Christine, was Italian by birth, creates a closer alignment between the women.

case remains to be made for Scrope's translation and the roughly contemporary but independent translation known as the *Lyttil Bibell of Knyghthod*, which both seek to produce authority by appropriating the *Othea*.⁴ As I will demonstrate, masculine and feminine in these works are not represented as opposed and irreconcilable, for these male translators assert their authority through their identification with Christine's women counsellors.

When male poets translate and adapt the *Othea* for new audiences, the question most naturally raised is whether they accept Christine's validation of women's authority or return to defining men's authority against women. Scrope's *Epistle of Othea* and the *Lyttil Bibell of Knyghthod* demonstrate vastly different views of translation, exemplarity, and women counsellors. Scrope offers an extremely close translation with his own Preface, whereas the *Bibell*-poet composes an entirely new Proem that replaces Christine's Prologue, expands poetic *textes* to insert his own views into Christine's framework, and frequently restores the same antifeminist readings that Christine sought to eliminate. With the exception of Scrope's Preface, these translations have been little studied, likely because Scrope follows Christine's French meticulously while the *Bibell* diverges so far from the French that it has been labelled a poor translation. Except for James D. Gordon's edition (1942), the *Bibell* has never received sustained critical attention, and scholars rarely provide more than a note of its existence or the citation of a variant reading.⁵ Yet these two texts reward further study because they give evidence of how male poets engage with Christine's exemplary form and her powerful images of women authorities.

What makes the *Othea* crucial in the context of feminized counsel is that the work foregrounds women's intellectual contributions and, in particular, asserts that men must take women seriously as counsellors on matters that affect the kingdom. Using strategies not unlike those of the *Melibee*, Christine exploits the form of the exemplum to underscore the necessity of evaluating universal truths or stereotypes in order to determine whether they suit specific circumstances or people. By depicting a strong counselling persona in *Othea* and using the exemplum to urge readers to reconsider antifeminist stereotypes, Christine elevates

⁴ The *Bibell*, extant in BL, MS Harley 838, was copied by Anthony Babyngton (c. 1477–1537) near the turn of the century but likely was translated c. 1450, by an unknown poet, according to linguistic analysis (A 'Lyttil Bibell of Knyghthod', ed. by Gordon, pp. xxxi, lxii–lxiii). To distinguish it from Scrope's work, I use the modern editorial subtitle.

⁵ See, for example, Kelly, "A Fulle Wyse Gentyll-Woman of Fraunce": *The Epistle of Othea*, p. 236; Meale, 'Patrons, Buyers, and Owners', p. 228 n. 50; and the variant reading noted by Amsler, 'Rape and Silence', p. 83.

the status of the feminized counsellor to an authoritative position that rises above assumptions that women are wicked, inferior, and inherently sinful.⁶ Taken as a whole, the very same strategies that Christine marshals to validate her own ability to advise princes will make the feminized counsellor an attractive subject position for her English translators. Scrope and the *Bibell*-poet replicate, revise, and respond to the *Othea*'s omnipresent images of women's writing and female counsellors, sometimes quite favourably. Crucially, the exemplars for authority, wisdom, and good counsel with which they identify are feminine: the voice of the female counsellor intertwines with each male translator's advising enterprise, so that their voices, goals, and advice are inseparable.

Although Scrope has often been criticized for disregarding Christine's authority, and although the *Bibell*-poet restores some traditional antifeminist commentary, examinations of their texts reveal that both men follow Christine's models, adopt her strategies of implied deference, and identify with women counsellors in order to generate authority for themselves as writers and counsellors. The productive differences in the two versions reveal the degrees to which the male poets identify with Christine's primary figure for wisdom (*Othea*) and challenge the commonplace that masculine authority should be defined against a feminine lack of authority. These translations demonstrate how such feminized models enable male poets to enter the specialized arena of advice literature, and they do not displace the feminine from late medieval discourses of political and chivalric virtues, so much as strive to make room in these discourses for all voices typically excluded.

Christine's Othea: Using the Exemplum to Defend Women's Authority

Before turning to the translations, however, it will be helpful to clarify how the exemplum form allows Christine to counter or deflect antifeminist stereotypes about women and promote women as significant contributors to supposedly 'masculine' discourses. Staking out these positions benefits Christine, for it has long been recognized that she deploys *Othea* as a precedent for her own foray into advising princes.⁷ The fictive audience is, of course, young Hector of Troy,

⁶ On Christine's valorization of the feminine, see Reno, 'Feminist Aspects of Christine de Pizan's *Epistre d'Othea à Hector*', and Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women*, pp. 53–56.

⁷ Hindman, *Christine de Pizan's Epistre Othea*, pp. 21–60, definitively identifies the work as a mirror for princes by meticulously tracing how Christine draws on the principles of the genre and evokes both general political ideals and material specifically relevant to her audience

but this device of an imagined youthful audience justifies the process of reeducation that Christine directed at more experienced readers, the mature members of the French royal family to whom she presented the book: Louis d'Orleans (the youngest, at twenty-one), Isabeau of Bavaria, Jean Duke of Berry, and Philip the Bold Duke of Burgundy. For these earliest audiences, some of the most powerful figures in Europe during a time of political turmoil, when there were threats of both civil war and war with England, the *Othea* provides valuable guidance in political wisdom. Widely popular, the work circulated in France and England throughout the fifteenth century and well into the sixteenth; Christine composed a new dedication for Henry IV of England, there were four early print editions in France, and three Englishmen produced translations between 1440–1540 (the two under consideration here and one in print).⁸ A project that began as counsel for the learned aristocracy in ethical governance became a medieval bestseller and a vehicle for transmitting social virtues more broadly.

At the same time, these versions of the *Othea* transmitted Christine's defences of women and her assertions of her own authority as a woman writer. Both are rooted in the hermeneutic strategies required by her uniquely constructed exemplum, which is based on clerical forms but ultimately challenges patriarchal interpretive practices. The *Othea* moralizes one hundred classical exemplars to chivalric and spiritual virtues through allegoresis or 'imposed allegory'.⁹ Each chapter contains three labelled divisions: poetic *texte*, prose *glose*, and prose *allegorie*. In each *texte*, Othea presents a classical exemplar for Hector of Troy (even though, of course, the *textes* and Othea are Christine's inventions). The *glose* and *allegorie* provide Christine's moralizations of Othea's classical, pagan references, followed by citations of relevant philosophical, ethical, theological, or scriptural authorities. The *glose* supplies additional narrative details and delivers a historically plausible interpretation of any fantastic elements (a process called euhemerism or

of French aristocrats. On the work as a more general courtesy manual, see Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery: Some Medieval Books*, pp. 44, 286; and Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women*, pp. 52–88.

⁸ Robert Wyer produced the printed English translation *The .C. Hystories of Troye* in 1540. See Laidlaw, 'Christine de Pizan, the Earl of Salisbury and Henry IV', pp. 129–43; and Parussa, *Othea*, pp. 81–86, 501–09, who notes that instead of Henry IV, the recipient could have been Charles VI. On the more widespread popularity of the work, see Campbell, 'Christine de Pisan en Angleterre', pp. 663–66; Mombello, *La tradizione manoscritta dell'Epistre Othea*, pp. 359–70; and Brown, 'The Reconstruction of an Author in Print', pp. 215–35.

⁹ See Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery: Some Medieval Books*, pp. 227–28.

mythographic reading).¹⁰ It also applies the exemplar's virtues to chivalric, political, and philosophical ideals, while the *allegorie* advances a spiritual interpretation linked to Christian morals. Luxury copies of the *Othea* contain illuminations that function as visual guides through the work and as mnemonic devices that evoke a chapter's content.¹¹ Pedagogically, each chapter as a whole should cause the reader to visualize the exemplar and learn from his or her experiences.¹² But even by medieval standards, the *Othea's* structure is complex for vernacular literature, and early manuscript versions imitate the format of Latin commentaries, in which *textes* appear in the middle of the page, with *gloses* and *allegories* in the surrounding margins.

Because her form and general methods resonate with Latin textual traditions, Christine has been accused of patriarchal reading, but her practice instead subverts hierarchical readings.¹³ She had previously criticized the potential for glosses to damage the text itself in a remark to Pierre Col that alludes to a common proverb about the 'gloses d'Orliens, qui destruisent le texte' (glosses of Orleans, which destroyed the text).¹⁴ By contrast, her interpretive habits in the *Othea* take advantage of glossing but also validate the literal level of reading. On the one hand, the very act of glossing asserts the interpreter's authority over the text: it allows Christine to validate her status as an adviser by reinterpreting Othea's pagan verses for her Christian readers. On the other, her specific mode of glossing rejects the totalizing function of the patriarchal gloss, which sought

¹⁰ See Chance, *Medieval Mythography*, 1, pp. 1–7; and Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Reading Myth*, pp. 187–93. These interpretations, popular in the Middle Ages, reconcile classical works with Christian morality, but many, like the *Ovide moralisé* also transmit intense antifeminist views.

¹¹ For a more detailed analysis of chapter components and the *Othea's* structure, see Ignatius, 'Manuscript Format and Text Structure', pp. 121–23; and Hindman, *Christine de Pizan's Epistre Othea*, pp. 21–25.

¹² See Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, pp. 226–43; and Zimmerman, 'Christine de Pizan: Memory's Architect', p. 61.

¹³ The resemblance to Latin commentaries has prompted Schibanoff, 'Taking the Gold out of Egypt', to charge Christine with practising 'patriarchal reading' instead of challenging it. Yet Christine's appropriation of patriarchal strategies nevertheless undercuts traditional antifeminist readings; see Ignatius, 'Christine de Pizan's Epistre Othea', pp. 132–34; Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Reading Myth*, pp. 78–88, and Doyle, 'Beyond Resistance', pp. 89–95.

¹⁴ Christine cites the proverb in her arguments against Pierre Col, who defended a section of the *Roman de la Rose* through a gloss, which she considers to misrepresent the actual text more favourably than it deserves. See Christine de Pizan, *Debate of the Romance of the Rose*, ed. and trans. by Hult, pp. 186–87, and Christine de Pizan, *Le débat sur le Roman de la Rose*, ed. by Hicks, p. 144. See also Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, p. 122.

to supersede a literal reading with a superior allegorical and spiritual meaning.¹⁵ Christine resists any sense of a hierarchical programme in which the *allegorie's* spiritual interpretation is the dominant one, because although the first forty-four chapters are grouped by *allegorie*, the subsequent fifty-six chapters are not, and the narrative level determines the sequencing when Christine treats the Trojan saga.¹⁶ In addition, she frequently provides multiple interpretations, rather than one dominant one, not only in each chapter's *glose* and *allegorie*, but also across chapters: for instance, Hercules is both an exemplar of strength and an enemy of Hector's family (Ch. 3, ll. 4–11; Ch. 37, l. 8); Minerva and Pallas are treated as different aspects of the same individual, signifying different moral and spiritual concepts (Ch. 13 and 14); Achilles is a great warrior but also a foolish lover and the scheming killer of Hector (Ch. 71, 92, and 93); Circe may represent a land or country, or an inconstant woman (Ch. 98, ll. 20–23); and even Hector the dedicatee is an ideal prince but ultimately also a rashly disobedient husband and son and a covetous warrior (Ch. 88, 90, 91, and 92). To complicate matters further, Christine's innovative allegorizations boldly deviate from her sources and often 'risk incurring the suspicion of readers familiar with more established interpretations.'¹⁷ The *Othea* is the result of a deliberate process of destabilizing hierarchical readings and reader expectations as Christine deploys patriarchal strategies precisely in order to challenge patriarchal attitudes and totalizing views.

Christine's chapters — and the opening ones in particular — train readers in the hermeneutic strategies essential for understanding both her exempla and her more sophisticated challenges to antifeminist stereotypes. As Rosalind Brown-Grant has observed, Christine presents her reader with puzzles to solve in the course of the reading, like Othea's address to Hector that urges him to acquire

¹⁵ Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, pp. 120–22, outlines and criticizes the glossing practices that assert male glossators' dominance over the literal text.

¹⁶ The *allegorie* groupings are as follows: the four cardinal virtues (Ch. 1–4), the seven planets and their spiritual significances (Ch. 6–12), the three theological virtues (Ch. 13–15), the seven deadly sins (Ch. 16–22), the twelve articles of the faith (Ch. 23–34), and the ten commandments (Ch. 35–44). The subsequent chapters treat vices and virtues without unifying themes across the *allegories*, and the narrative content structures Chapters 88–97. Hindman, *Christine de Pizan's Epistre Othea*, pp. 55–60, also points out other clusters in which the Trojan content justifies chapter groupings.

¹⁷ Armstrong and Kay, *Knowing Poetry*, p. 180, remind us that Christine's revisions would have been striking, and perhaps off-putting, to some contemporary audience members. See also Dulac, 'Travail allégorique et ruptures du sens chez Christine de Pizan', pp. 24–32; and Desmond and Sheingorn, *Myth, Montage, and Visuality*, pp. 99–156.

Le cheval qui par l'aire s'en vole.
 C'est Pegasus le renommé
 Qui de tous vaillans est amé. (Ch. 1, ll. 39–41)

The horse that flies through the air. That is, Pegasus the renowned, who is loved by all valiant men.

The purpose of this allusion is not fully clear until Chapter 5 interprets Pegasus as the symbol of good reputation, which is what Othea means her pupil to acquire.¹⁸ Christine's chapter deploys Pegasus uniquely, in that her image of Perseus as an exemplar riding the winged horse suggests that the continued practice of virtues allows the good prince to master reputation as one would a steed.¹⁹ These and numerous other intertextual references encourage the reader to negotiate among all three levels of each chapter, interpret across chapters, and embrace multiple levels of reading.

But Christine also instructs her reader to consider the application of exemplars and of their multiple potential significances to his own life. While describing Hercules's impressive feats, such as capturing Cerberus, rescuing Pirotheus and Theseus from Hell, and battling fierce creatures, she warns readers not to seek out similar battles.²⁰ Crucially, she muses, 'Je ne sçay se tu l'imagines' (I do not know if you imagine this) (Ch. 3, l. 36) — a parenthetical comment that reminds her readers that they *should* be imagining what imitating the exemplar means in their worlds. The *glose* explains for the audience the poetic process called *couverture*, whereby poets invented fantastic battles to convey the brave deeds a strong man might accomplish (Ch. 3, ll. 62–68); it also asserts that every reader can imitate Hercules and demonstrate fortitude 'selon sa possibilité' (according to his ability)

¹⁸ Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women*, pp. 56–64.

¹⁹ No classical source depicts Perseus (instead of Bellerophon) riding Pegasus. The convoluted narrative of the *Ovide moralisé* may seem to suggest that Perseus rode Pegasus when he 'flies' (vole) through the air after killing Medusa, IV.6210–18, but the text never states that he was on the horse. Boccaccio, *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium Libri*, ed. by Romano, XII.25, also implies that Perseus rode Pegasus. See Christine de Pizan, *Epistre Othea*, ed. by Parussa, pp. 389–90. Steadman, 'Perseus upon Pegasus and Ovid Moralized', pp. 407–10, proposes that Perseus replaces Bellerophon to avoid the associations with ambition that Bellerophon acquired in later medieval texts that depicted him attempting to ride Pegasus to Heaven. Christine thereby avoids the fear that ambition might lead to pride by representing fame as something one controls only through the practice of continued virtues; the *allegorie* supports this interpretation through its warning that good conscience and the desire to please God must motivate the drive for fame (Ch. 5, ll. 50–58).

²⁰ Christine conflates some of Hercules's deeds with ones attributed to Theseus; compare, for example, *Ovide moralisé*, ed. by De Boer and others, VII.723–24, 1802–14.

(Ch. 3, ll. 68–70). The tripartite chapter elements provide multiple options for what fortitude looks like in practice: physical strength, the mental strength exercised through deliberation and using good sense (Ch. 3, ll. 47–49), and the spiritual virtue of fortifying oneself against fleshly desires (Ch. 3, ll. 79–86). This chapter is the touchstone for elucidating the construction of Christine's exempla: she does not recommend the exact imitation of exemplars, but she instead expects her reader to determine the most appropriate way to apply the exemplum's lesson 'selon sa possibilité', which may require interpretation beyond the literal level.

Yet the literal level of the text — that level on which gender is tangible — is not erased by the emphasis on interpretation to a more generalized level in the *glose* and *allegorie*. Brown-Grant has argued that Christine de-sexualizes female characters so that they 'cease to signify literal women and come instead to represent virtues, vices, objects and even the human soul'. She is right that by using allegory, Christine 'ensures that her female characters were not read exclusively on the literal level', and that this is an important innovation beyond eroticized and misogynist representations of women in the *Roman de la Rose*.²¹ Yet Christine's allegoresis does not obliterate the literal meaning so much as expand it, and gender never ceases to signify in her exempla. The viewing of protagonists as historical figures is essential to the modelling process encouraged by the exemplum's didactic mode: the reader must see the exemplar as an imitable human model. For this reason, Christine insists upon a historically plausible interpretation of the protagonists and rationalizes away fantastic events as poetic embellishments: pagans mistook Othea for a goddess, Hercules did not *really* go to Hell, Pygmalion did not love a statue but rather a hard-hearted woman, and so on. Such *glose* reinterpretations ask readers to view the *texte* more literally than the *texte* itself does, before adding moral interpretations that will then receive additional significance in the *allegorie*. The literal level of the narrative and literal attributes like gender thereby retain relevance to each chapter's overall significance without being fully supplanted by a universalizing meaning; the allegorical levels reinterpret but do not negate the *texte*, and the reader must apprehend multiple meanings simultaneously.²²

²¹ Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women*, pp. 80–87, at p. 87.

²² Akbari, *Seeing Through the Veil*, p. 12, draws on Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages*, pp. 63–65, to discuss allegoresis as 'horizontal allegory' in which 'personifications lose their fixed identity as embodied abstraction and behave in ways that suggest they are less personifications than personae, fictional characters with motivations and emotions'. In my view, such individual characteristics trouble personification and indicate the importance of the literal level to the narrative purpose. See Ignatius, 'Christine de Pizan's Epistre Othea', pp. 132–40, on how Christine's earliest manuscript layout allows multiple levels of reading to coexist productively.

The best examples that illustrate how Christine's allegoresis allows the literal and allegorical to coexist are in fact the figures that seem most likely to represent personifications: Othea and Temperance. Christine allegorizes the four Cardinal Virtues over the course of four chapters, and in the first two, Othea and Temperance are both grammatically and literally female. But already Christine thwarts expectations for personified female virtues by illustrating Fortitude and Justice in the next two chapters with *male* exemplars of kingship: Hercules and Minos.²³ This division reflects the historical alignment of strength and justice as qualities exercised by men, and kings in particular, who formed the basis of the medieval military and legal systems. Conversely, it implies that prudence and temperance are feminine virtues exemplified by women, and, more importantly, women whom Christine represents as counsellors essential to a prince's success. Like Chaucer in the *Melibee*, Christine gradually undoes the sense of personification that might be expected in a figure for prudence by emphasizing the historical quality of womanhood.

In Othea, Christine creates a woman authority figure free from any preconceived notions about Pallas, Minerva, or any other classical goddesses that she might have exploited to exemplify women's wisdom.²⁴ The unique name of Othea resists a reading of this counsellor as a personified authority or trait, and focuses on her as an individual woman. Christine asks readers to perceive Othea on three levels that contribute to her authority: as the goddess of prudence, as a historical wise woman (not a goddess), and as a named exemplar of the Cardinal Virtue of prudence (not quite as the personification Prudence). Importantly, she places emphasis on Othea as a woman — and a precedent for wise women counsellors — through euhemerism and allegoresis. But rather than simply perform these interpretive tasks, she also explains how they work, giving her readers the tools to practise interpretation themselves. After the *texte* asserts Othea's knowledge and ability to advise men to gain great reputations, the *glose* denies Othea's status as goddess by claiming that pagans mistook any exceptional persons for deities (Ch. 1, ll. 85–90).²⁵ Christine then offers a more historically plausible interpreta-

²³ See Hindman, *Christine de Pizan's Epistre Othea*, pp. 51–55, for analysis of Christine's innovative representation of the four Cardinal Virtues.

²⁴ Christine acknowledges the relationship between Pallas and Minerva (Ch. 13 and 14) with no reference to Othea, supporting the impression that she is a distinct figure. There is no source for her name, but the most plausible explanation seems to be that Christine combined the invocation 'O' with *thea*, Greek for 'goddess'; see Hindman, *Christine de Pizan's Epistre Othea*, pp. 40–42; and Scrope, *The Epistle of Othea*, ed. by Bühler, p. 129n.

²⁵ Othea appears to be a prototype for the women that Christine validates in the *Cité des dames* by exploiting this same claim about pagan misunderstandings. See, for example, Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. by Richards, p. 73.

tion of Othea as 'une moult sage dame' (a very wise woman) (Ch. 1, l. 92), who sent Hector valuable counsel to aid him in attaining renown. Even when she observes that Othea signifies prudence — a move that verges on personification — Christine notes that she has developed the character and name 'aucunement poetique et accordant a la vraye histoire' (somewhat poetically and according to the true history) (Ch. 1, ll. 107–108). Gesturing to 'la vraye histoire' reminds readers to interpret mythological figures as historical personages, not as abstractions or goddesses.²⁶ This emphasis on Othea's historical existence renders her a convincingly 'realistic' precedent for Christine's own activities.

When Christine explains how allegoresis extends the *glose* interpretation into the spiritual realm, she establishes a sense of the different elements of the chapter working together in tandem, so that each maintains its own authority and significance. She draws a parallel between the chivalric virtues represented in *gloses* and the spiritual war against the devil as 'droite chevalrie' (righteous chivalry) that exemplifies 'l'esperit chevaleureux' (the chivalrous spirit) (Ch. 1, ll. 135, 142). The application of Holy Scripture to the exemplar requires not the obliteration of the moral interpretation of the *glose* but an expansion of meaning: chivalric virtues inform spiritual ones and vice versa. Prudence must be exercised on the worldly and spiritual levels simultaneously.²⁷ Yet Christine also retains the connection to femininity by representing prudence as the mother of all virtues (Ch. 1, ll. 146–48). Foregrounding the feminine gender in the *allegorie* is particularly important lest Othea be completely reduced to a personification of Prudence or to Hector's prudence.²⁸ In the *glose* and *allegorie*, Christine blurs the distinctions among literal and allegorical modes so that the literal still retains relevance, without being

²⁶ Exempla frequently cast characters as historical, even if they never lived, or divorced historical figures from their actual circumstances. The underlying theory behind emphasizing a historical existence for exemplars is for authors to assert that these protagonists faced real social and cultural dilemmas, thereby creating more concrete and 'realistic' models for their readers. See Hampton, *Writing from History*, pp. 5–14.

²⁷ See also Green, 'On Translating Christine as a Philosopher', pp. 120–29, on Christine's tendency to equate prudence and wisdom, and also to conceive of prudence as applying both to practical worldly wisdom and spiritual matters; for an alternate conception of Prudence, see Forhan, *The Political Theory of Christine de Pizan*, pp. 100–08.

²⁸ Christine acknowledges that Othea may represent, 'la vertu de prudence et sagece dont lui mesmes fu aournez' (the virtue of prudence and wisdom with which he himself [Hector] was equipped), but the emphasis on her womanhood suggests that this may have a metaphorical meaning along the same lines that a counsellor might be called the king's 'right hand', rather than limiting Othea to an existence purely as Hector's internal faculty of prudence (Ch. 1, ll. 102–03).

replaced by a universalizing meaning.²⁹ Instead, the audience must reconsider the relationship among woman, prudence, wisdom, counsel, and virtue simultaneously.

Because she shares a name with a virtue, Temperance seems immediately identifiable as a personification of that virtue, but Christine's treatment of her demonstrates the tensions between the modes of personification and allegoresis that enable an emphasis on women's counsel. Christine consistently refers to her as 'la deesse d'atrempance' (the goddess of Temperance) or 'deesse', not simply 'Attempance', as would be typical for a personification (Ch. 2, ll. 22, 29). When she does use 'Attempance', she notes that 'Dist Othea que Attempance est sa serour' (Othea says that Temperance is her sister), so that the *glose* maintains Temperance's tie to Othea, whom Christine adamantly argued was a historical woman (Ch. 2, l. 32). Through the same euhemeristic reading that pagan goddesses were actually exceptional historical women, Christine also suggests that they are not to be accepted as mere personifications. Temperance's close relationship to her sister Othea and Christine's emphasis on Temperance's powers of regulation foreground an alternative possibility for the figure. The chapter's illustration, present from the earliest manuscript, features Temperance adjusting the weights of a clock; later, Christine added an explanation of the image: the human body can be symbolized by a clock, so just as a clock's weights must be kept in balance to function, so must the body be regulated by Temperance (Ch. 2, ll. 1–7).³⁰ The image strikes an uneasy balance between presenting a woman or a personification: how does Temperance regulate a knight if she is a pagan *deesse* (read: woman) and not a personification? Since Christine emphasizes the similarities of Othea and Temperance (Ch. 2, ll. 15–16, 32–36), I find it plausible to understand that the regulation of the knight must be carried out in much the same way that Temperance's sister Othea guides Hector, through advice. Othea and Temperance thus exemplify women counsellors, and Christine turns the act of counsel whereby *de regimine* texts seek to regulate their pupils' self-governance into a feminine performance.

By problematizing 'universal truths' and traditional allegorizations, she foregrounds the general rule that readers must always interpret the advice and nar-

²⁹ For an alternate view that Christine foregrounds the universalized meaning to defend women, see Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women*, pp. 78–88.

³⁰ Meiss, *French Painting in the Time of Jean de Berry*, p. 34, proposes that Christine formulated the association of Temperance with the clock during the illustration of BnF, MS fr. 848 and then revised later manuscripts for clarity. Christine is the first to link the clock with Temperance's regulatory powers; see Willard, 'Christine de Pizan's Clock of Temperance', pp. 149–54.

ratives that they receive because there can be multiple valid interpretations of the same exemplar. Much like the *Melibee* and its sources, Christine plays with the tensions between literal and allegorical, particular and universal, to advocate general virtues while asserting the specific, integral role that women play in important discourses that are traditionally defined as ‘masculine’, such as writing, medicine, and politics.³¹ She presents a range of ‘masculine’ discourses to which her ‘historical’ women have contributed: women possess military skills (Minerva, Penthesilea), advance agricultural processes (Ceres, Isis), invent the alphabet (Io), teach Galen medicine (Cleopatra, in Ch. 45), prefigure Christian theological virtues (Minerva, Pallas, Penthesilea), and launch many other advantageous social and cultural developments.³² Because Christine’s euhemerism identifies all goddesses as simply remarkable women, Christine can appropriate the wisdom and talents of Othea, Minerva, Ceres, and others for herself and womankind.

Of course, there are also women who exemplify vice, just as there are negative male exemplars, but Christine deftly prevents any easy association of woman as a universal category with the vice exemplified by a specific woman. This argument is unmistakable in her treatment of Pasiphaë, which seeks to structure men’s approaches to other women as much as defend Pasiphaë herself from misogynist attitudes. Like *Melibee*’s Prudence must, Christine asserts the importance of rejecting antifeminist stereotypes and evaluating women individually, as part of the staple mirrors for princes lesson that authoritative advice does not always pertain to all circumstances. Her *texte* begins with that lesson, not Pasiphaë’s story:

Pour tant se Phasiphé fu fole,
Ne vueilles lire en ton escole
Que teles soient toutes fames,
Car il est maintes vaillans dames. (Ch. 45, ll. 2–5)

For as much as Pasiphaë was foolish, do not desire to read in your school that all women are such, because there are many worthy women.

She directly challenges the stereotyping that derives from antifeminist and clerical teachings,³³ and the rest of the chapter supports her claim. The *glose* defends

³¹ See also Green, ‘On Translating Christine as a Philosopher’, p. 121.

³² On Christine’s emphasis on women as creators and educators, see, for example, Chance, ‘Christine’s Minerva, the Mother Valorized’, pp. 121–33.

³³ Christine attacks this essentializing of women throughout her career, perhaps most vociferously and directly in the literary quarrel over the misogyny and obscenity of the *Roman de la Rose*. See Willard, *Christine de Pizan: Her Life and Works*, pp. 73–89; and Christine de Pizan, *Debate of the Romance of the Rose*, ed. and trans. by Hult, pp. 11–18.

Pasiphaë from antifeminist representations of the dangers of female sexuality and bestiality through euhemerism: her lover was not literally a bull but a man of ‘vile condition’ (i.e., a social inferior or immoral man), leading to the poetic embellishment that their offspring was half-man, half-bull (Ch. 45, ll. 7–17).³⁴ Christine then asserts that even though Pasiphaë behaved in such a way that the good knight must not ‘dire ne soustenir que toutes femmes soient semblables, comme la verité soit manifeste au contraire’ (say or support that all women are similar, as the truth may be demonstrated to the contrary) (Ch. 45, ll. 18–20). And the *allegorie* recuperates Pasiphaë by interpreting her as the soul returned to God and forgiven for previous sins (Ch. 45, ll. 25–35), implicating misogynists because God can forgive Pasiphaë’s errors, but clerics apparently cannot.³⁵

Effectively, Christine argues that the reader who wishes to exemplify a good Christian knight must not participate in antifeminism. Moreover, instead of giving an authoritative citation from renowned physician Galen’s writings (which readers would be led to expect from every preceding chapter), Christine provides evidence of his experiences with Cleopatra, who was a historical, if unidentified, medicinal authority: ‘Galien apprist la science de medicine d’une femme moult vaillant et sage, appelee Cleopatre, qui lui apprist a cognoistre maintes bonnes herbes et leur proprieté’ (Galen learned the science of medicine from a very worthy and wise woman called Cleopatra, who taught him to recognize many good herbs and their properties) (Ch. 45, ll. 20–23).³⁶ The example of a worthy woman teacher legitimizes women’s wisdom and clearly emphasizes Galen’s experience with an individual woman over ‘authoritative’ claims that all women are lecherous and foolish like Pasiphaë or other reductive assumptions transmitted through antifeminist works. Obviously Christine valued men’s authoritative

³⁴ The illumination for this chapter does depict Pasiphaë embracing a bull, but as Desmond and Sheingorn, *Myth, Montage, and Visuality*, pp. 137–42, observe, the portrayal validates Pasiphaë’s sexual desire and agency by depicting her ‘with a gentle sensuality’ rather than the transgressive lust portrayed in *Ovide moralisé*, ed. by De Boer and others (p. 140).

³⁵ Precedent for this interpretation can be found in Boccaccio, *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium Libri*, ed. by Romano, VIII.10. In the *Othea*, this chapter follows those allegorizing the Ten Commandments and creates a nice trajectory in which Christine advises readers against transgressions but reminds them of the possibility of redemption. Pasiphaë appears as the fulfillment of that process — a sinner redeemed whose human imperfections give force to the *allegorie*.

³⁶ According to Flemming, ‘Women, Writing and Medicine in the Classical World’, p. 268, neither Galen’s reference to her in *On Compound Pharmaka according to Place* nor other writings attributed to Cleopatra give any evidence whether this Cleopatra is Cleopatra VII or any of her royal predecessors.

writings, for the arguments of her *gloses* and *allegories* typically depend on them, but here she creates a space in which women's wisdom makes significant intellectual contributions to the typically masculine discourse of medicine. Cleopatra becomes another precedent for Christine's own advising enterprise that argues that women's knowledge must be taken seriously.

The *Othea* must be read with dual goals in mind: the instruction of a prince in political virtues and the defence of women's capability to advise and educate men. Christine's imaginative chronology, in which Othea's power of prophecy allows her to advise Hector to avoid even the exact circumstances that bring about his death, asserts that women counsellors should intervene in men's affairs and that leaders should listen.³⁷ Although Hector dies as prophesied, there remains the parallel success story exemplified by the Sibyl and Augustus, in which the Sibyl's prophecy of Christ converts the emperor to Christianity and leads to his success as 'prince [...] de tout le monde' (prince of all the world) (Ch. 100, l. 24).³⁸ For Christine, both Othea's counsel and the Sibyl's intervention signify 'que bonne parole et bon enseignement font a louer de quelconques personne que ilz soient dis' (that good speech and good teaching bring praise to whatever persons have spoken them) (Ch. 100, ll. 31–33).³⁹ The assertion echoes the mirrors for princes commonplace that good counsel ennobles any speaker, which, as I have been arguing, paves the way for women and lay poets to assume the authority to counsel aristocrats.

Yet, implicitly, Hector is a flawed student for whom Othea's references to Augustus and Christ would have little resonance, and he fails to apply her valua-

³⁷ See also Noakes, *Timely Reading*, pp. 126–29, on how *Othea*'s disjunctive chronology and killing of its addressee stress the need for readers to internalize both the lessons and interpretive strategies taught in the work.

³⁸ A survey of medieval attitudes toward sibylline prophecies of Christ reveals that writers accepted the Sibyl's counsel as crucial advice to leaders. See Solterer, *Master and Minerva*, pp. 165–67; Waegman, 'The Medieval Sibyl', pp. 83–107; McGinn, 'The Sibylline Tradition in the Middle Ages', pp. 22–30; and Le Merrer, 'Des sibylles à la Sapience', p. 24.

³⁹ Of course, the *glose* and *allegorie* citations are gender-neutral to underscore the universal validity of wise counsel. Indeed, Christine does not imply that women have cornered the market on intelligent counsel, for Hector's brother Helenus also exemplifies a wise counsellor (Ch. 77). But Chapter 100 elevates women's counsel to the same level as men's counsel, because women counsellors are included among the 'quelconques personne' (whatever persons) who may speak good words (Ch. 100, l. 33). I have translated 'parole' and 'enseignement' generally, but 'parole' could also connote 'argument' and 'proverb', while 'enseignement' could indicate 'good advice' and 'wisdom' (Hindley, Langley, and Levy, *Old French-English Dictionary*, s.v. *parole*; s.v. *enseignement*).

ble advice.⁴⁰ He is finally an imperfect pagan model for Christine's readers to surpass *because of* her advice. Christine cannot foresee the future, but she possesses one thing that allows her to outshine Othea and even the Sibyl in authority: a sophisticated knowledge of Christian theology and morality, including authoritative writings that post-date the Sibyl's intervention.⁴¹ She positions herself as the textual mediator between the pagan past of Othea's letter and the Christian present through her *glose* and *allegorie* moralizations, and by binding her counsel to Christian morality and theology, Christine banishes any impression that her advice might be ineffective or lack authoritative force. As a final authorizing move, the last *allegorie* constructs an ideal prince who willingly listens to all counsellors and scorns no Scripture, person, or doctrine (Ch. 100, ll. 35–45). The description entreats the aristocratic reader to adopt these attitudes, and Christine effectively argues that accepting a woman's counsel is on par with the other crucial lessons taught in the *Othea* — earning salvation, learning the Ten Commandments, or adopting the moral qualities of a good ruler. In fact, as the Sibyl's instruction of Augustus suggests, listening to a female counsellor speeds those goals.

These images of women's intellectual contributions and political counsel shatter the modesty *topos* of Christine as a 'femme indigne' (unworthy woman) (Prol., l. 52). Her appropriations of pagan narratives thoroughly demonstrate her scholarly prowess in interpreting moral, political, and spiritual lessons. The *Othea* does not advance the direct claim for women's authority that Christine develops in later works, but neither does it imagine that she must masculinize herself and reject femininity in order to gain authority, as does the nearly contemporary *Le livre de la mutacion de fortune* (c. 1400–03). In that work, Christine declares that Fortune turned her into a man to strengthen her mind and her body, and thereby give her the power to write (ll. 1335–90).⁴² To earn respect, Christine effectively had to write within masculine traditions, although that is not to say that she did not depart from them. Her textual practices in the *Othea* may be 'masculine' in the sense that they draw on male-authored sources and masculine philosophical and theological authorities, but she reconfigures them to defend women against stereotypes, to assert the intelligence of women, and to advocate for the validity of the woman counsellor's role in the so-called 'masculine' world of politics.

⁴⁰ Abray, 'Imagining the Masculine', pp. 143–47, asserts that Christine's point is to undermine the conception of masculinity merely as physical strength and foreground intellectual and political capabilities of Charles V as the true measure of the ideal ruler.

⁴¹ See also Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women*, p. 60.

⁴² See Christine de Pizan, *Le Livre de la mutacion de fortune*, ed. by Solente, ll. 1–156, and Nephew, 'Gender Reversals and Intellectual Gender', pp. 517–32.

Although it is a commonplace that Christine regularly identifies with her women protagonists and uses them to develop her own authority, the *Othea's* women, and the Sibyl especially, mark a crucial distinction from female allegorical personifications such as Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, who construct the *Cité des dames* (1405), or Libera in the *Avision-Christine* (1405), who expresses Christine's own fears for her country. While these personifications advocate for women and articulate Christine's opinions, their authority draws heavily on the abstractions for which they are named. By contrast, the allegorized women exemplars in the *Othea* are still women, and the Sibyl exemplifies woman's capacity to change world history through counsel. These models authorize Christine's intervention in political discourses and place her as the culmination of a historical timeline of women authorities. The *Othea* and its exempla thereby allow Christine to work through her concerns about writing as a woman — and writing political advice — without denying the value of her gender.

No other exemplary text of this period explains the process of reading exempla as systematically as the *Othea* does, a fact that perhaps explains its widespread popularity in manuscript and early print editions. Because Christine teaches the hermeneutic practices essential to comprehending the work, the book would be valuable not only to aristocratic audiences but also to those lay readers who had little experience apprehending exempla. Her practical defence of her writing as authoritative counsel also could empower her lay translators and printers, as they used her work to gain recognition as producers of literature. Certainly, the later English translators Scrope and the anonymous *Bibell*-poet capitalized on the *Othea's* potential to legitimate writers outside traditional centres of authority. But these translations also required men to grapple intimately with Christine's challenges to antifeminist stereotypes and her unusual moralizations. Yet even in the hands of male poets who did not seem fully to share Christine's position on women's wisdom, her inventive premise of analysing Othea's letter and her tripartite exemplum form remain crucial to the transmission, if not of her precise defence of women, then at least of the lesson that negative gender stereotypes must be questioned. Once that premise is accepted, the woman counsellor truly emerges as a powerful force and as a point of identification for male poets that allows them to imitate Christine and appropriate Othea's voice to access authority.

Scrope's 'Book off Knyghthode'

The English translations present the *Othea* as a chivalric manual, which indicates the value of its contents beyond aristocratic readers to gentry and lower-status

audiences. Scrope refers to his translation as a 'Book off Knyghthode' or 'Boke off Cheuallry' (p. 122, ll. 9, 24), and while the work known as the *Lytil Bibell of Knyghthod* is untitled, its Proem refers to the project as a 'lytle bibell' designed to instruct the reader in 'noble chyvallrye' and 'prudent polecye' (p. 4, l. 20, p. 5, ll. 12–15). The translators market their conduct manuals as didactic guides on a significant contemporary topic, generalizing the *Othea* to emphasize its specific contents.⁴³ Both translations seek to improve knighthood, which was for practical purposes a political goal, even if the texts were no longer dedicated exclusively to princes. Late medieval writers constructed chivalry as a model for social life, and literature designed to reform chivalry asserted broader moral values that theoretically would improve the stability of the entire realm.⁴⁴ These texts promote what Gordon Kipling calls 'learned chivalry' as the hallmark of masculine achievement, thus redefining knighthood as a state of being educated in virtues foundational to the social and political well-being of the state.⁴⁵ But if 'chivalry' is merely cultural shorthand for the practice of social virtues (rather than martial deeds), then women could exercise chivalric virtues as well, and 'knighthood' opens up to apply to those who were not knights. Indeed, during the mid-to late fifteenth century, new members of the knightly classes and non-aristocratic readers anxious to conform to aristocratic standards become an important audience for conduct manuals.⁴⁶ The *Othea*, its detailed attention to hermeneutic instruction, and its women exemplars fit neatly into this revised approach to chivalric virtues.

As Jennifer Summit points out, this new definition of chivalry held advantages for writers: authors who did not possess traditional credentials could serve the state through their literary productions.⁴⁷ As a gentry secretary rather than soldier or clerk, Scrope lacked access not only to traditional forms of University or Church authority but also to any authority that might accrue from chivalric

⁴³ Campbell, 'Christine de Pisan en Angleterre', pp. 659–70; and Kelly, "A Fulle Wyse Gentyl-Woman of Fraunce": *The Epistle of Othea*, pp. 236–49. See also Hindman, *Christine de Pizan's Epistre Othea*, pp. 35–37.

⁴⁴ See Kaueper, *War, Justice, and Public Order*, p. 196, and Keen, 'Huizinga, Kilgour and the Decline of Chivalry', pp. 1–20. For a contemporary literary example, see Worcester, *The Boke of Noblesse*, ed. by Nichols, pp. 77–78, who posits a bygone golden age of chivalry that exemplified values lost in contemporary culture.

⁴⁵ Kipling, *The Triumph of Honour*, pp. 11–30, 169–72. See also Summit, *Lost Property: The Woman Writer and English Literary History*, pp. 72–74.

⁴⁶ The introduction to Ashley and Clark, *Medieval Conduct*, pp. ix–xx, discusses such new, mobile audiences for conduct manuals.

⁴⁷ Summit, *Lost Property: The Woman Writer and English Literary History*, pp. 71–81.

experiences. Although we lack biographic information about the *Bibell*-poet, his Proem expresses anxieties about the quality of his verse; while such expressions are conventional, they may point to a serious concern about his lack of status or poetic ability, especially because he radically alters Christine's original poetic form and content. Each man has or implies a cause to feel a lack of authority, and identifying with Christine and Othea permits each to overcome that liability and articulate crucial ethical advice. What makes study of these translations fascinating is the fact that both men generate their authority not by defining themselves against women but rather by identifying with women who challenge traditional assumptions in order to give authoritative counsel.

Amidst the turmoil of the fifteenth-century military conflicts with France and during later struggles to define kingship and knighthood, Christine (as the author of the *Othea*) and the figure of Othea herself offer Scrope the means to justify his literary intervention. Through these women's voices, he seeks to shape his readers' behaviour to conform to an image of moral, spiritual, and prudent knighthood that he advocates as essential to English conceptions of chivalry (perhaps in order to enable English knights to compete with and surpass French counterparts). Scrope moved in important aristocratic circles: he was the grandson of Richard Scrope, first Baron Scrope of Bolton, and, in addition to serving his stepfather Sir John Fastolf on campaigns in France and Normandy, he also briefly served Humphrey Duke of Gloucester in 1424.⁴⁸ While working as Fastolf's secretary, in a household with a demonstrated interest in literary activity, Scrope translated the *Othea* and, later, one of Christine's sources, Guillaume de Tignonville's *Dits moraulx*. He dedicated his first version of the *Epistle* to Fastolf, perhaps in hopes that the advice would reform his stepfather's behaviour and convince Fastolf to release Scrope's inheritance, which he repeatedly refused to relinquish.⁴⁹ Although Scrope may have initially had a personal motivation for the translation, he rededicated the piece and made it available to wider audiences. The other two extant manuscripts contain separate dedications to Humphrey Stafford Duke of Buckingham and to an unnamed 'hye princesse', who may have been Stafford's wife Anne Neville or their daughter Anne de Vere, whose will bequeathed 'my boke with the pistilles of Othea' to her sister-in-law.⁵⁰ The extant copy with the

⁴⁸ For details on Scrope's formative years and the activities in the Fastolf household, see Hughes, 'Stephen Scrope and the Circle of Sir John Fastolf', pp. 109–46.

⁴⁹ See Hughes, 'Stephen Scrope and the Circle of Sir John Fastolf', pp. 110–15; and Gibbs, 'Christine de Pizan's Epistre Othea in England', pp. 403–07.

⁵⁰ It must be cautioned that Stafford de Vere's will does not specify whether the book was in English or French, and even if it were in English, it might have been her father's copy; all

dedication to the 'hye princesse' was produced for Sir John Astley, which indicates that the original of that version was circulated and recopied. If Curt F. Bühler is correct that the manuscript Scrope released 'for publication' contained that dedication (explaining Astley's 'feminine' prologue), it would be notable that the publication copy of a seemingly masculine-oriented text contained a dedication to a female reader.⁵¹ Also, the Paston family, who were acquainted with Scrope and Fastolf, had access to at least one copy, which made the text plausibly available to the Paston women as readers.⁵² Therefore, Scrope's translation had a mixed-gender audience from its early days onward, and he apparently considered the same chivalric manual appropriate for aristocratic, gentry, men, and women readers.

Rather than excluding women from political and intellectual discourses, Scrope's translation promotes a spirit of collaboration between women's voices and masculine, authoritative discourses. His preface changes the way that readers would receive the tripartite sections of Christine's chapters by creating an elaborate fiction concerning the origins of the work:

And this seyde boke, at the instaunce & praer off a fulle wyse gentyl-woman of Frawnce called Dame Cristine, was compiled & grounded by the famous doctours of the most excellent in clerge the nobyl Universyte off Paris, made to the ful noble famous prynce and knyght off renounne in his dayes, beyng called Jon, Duke of Barry, thryd son to Kyng Jon of Frawnce, that he throwe hys knyghtly labourys, as welle in dedys of armes temporell as spirituell exercisyng by the space and tyme of C yeerys lyvyng, flowrid and rengnyd in grete wor-chip and renounne of chevalry. (p. 122, l. 34–p. 123, l. 6)

The dominant critical view asserts that this description sought to displace Christine's authority in order to elevate Scrope's own status as writer by positioning her outside masculine centres of literary production and denying her a sig-

suggestions are speculative because there is no firm evidence to the recipient's identity. See Desmond, 'Reading and Visuality in Stephen Scrope's *Translatio*', p. 106; and Jambeck, 'Patterns of Literary Patronage', pp. 239–42. Bühler lists other candidates, including Anne Beauchamp (wife of the thirteenth earl of Warwick) and, far more tentatively, Eleanor Cobham (wife of Humphrey of Gloucester) (Scrope, *The Epistle of Othea*, ed. by Bühler, pp. xix–xx).

⁵¹ See Scrope, *The Epistle of Othea*, ed. by Bühler, pp. xix–xxi, and Bühler, 'The Revisions and Dedications of the *Epistle of Othea*', pp. 266–70. Warminster, Longleat, MS 253 (L) is dedicated to Fastolf (c. 1440); Cambridge, St John's Coll., MS H 5 (S) is directed to Stafford (c. 1444–1460). New York, Morgan Libr., MS M 775 (M), completed before 1462, contains the dedication to the 'hye princesse'.

⁵² Scrope, *The Epistle of Othea*, ed. by Bühler, pp. xvii–xviii, n. See also *The Paston Letters*, ed. by Gairdner, VI, p. 66.

nificant role in the text's interventions into statecraft and politics.⁵³ Yet this view requires reexamination in light of the potential for Scrope's misunderstanding Christine's role in book production and the nevertheless authoritative position he affords her. His image differs substantially from Christine's self-representation as a poor woman hampered by 'la foiblesse | De feminine sens' (the feebleness of feminine intellect) and 'mon petit degré' (my low status), which she contrasts with her 'hault prince' (high prince) Jean (Prol. to Berry, ll. 44–45, 58). Scrope elevates Christine's status to describe her as an influential gentlewoman who possesses the money and status necessary to employ famous intellectuals to compile a learned book. His imagined Christine also has the audacity or authority to direct that book of counsel to Jean Duke of Berry, one of the most powerful men in France. In Scrope's fiction, Christine may not have physically written the book, but her actions initiated its production and would have warranted the portrait of Christine presenting the book to Jean that likely accompanied Scrope's manuscript exemplar. A near-contemporary analogue appears in the presentation portrait to the Queen Margaret Anthology (1445), which shows John Talbot, first earl of Shrewsbury, presenting the collection he commissioned to Margaret of Anjou, so such portraits were not exclusively reserved for authors.⁵⁴ There were, unfortunately, no precedents for women political or ethical writers in late medieval England (let alone one literate in Latin with access to the philosophers, theologians, and Church Fathers that Christine references), so, given all these circumstances and the prevailing misogyny of the time, it may not be surprising that Scrope mistook her role as that of influential patron. After all, modern scholars until recently still occasionally had to defend Christine as the author of her sophisticated works.⁵⁵ My point is that while Scrope's fiction is the result of endemic misogynist thought, it does not necessarily reflect a strategic plan to deny Christine *all* forms of authority.⁵⁶

⁵³ See Summit, *Lost Property: The Woman Writer and English Literary History*, pp. 73–74; Warren, *Women of God and Arms*, pp. 58–86; Mahoney, 'Middle English Regenderings of Christine de Pizan', pp. 407–09; and Chance, 'Gender Subversion and Linguistic Castration', p. 168.

⁵⁴ See Bossy, 'Arms and the Bride', pp. 237–40.

⁵⁵ Fenster, "'Perdre son latin': Christine de Pizan and Vernacular Humanism", pp. 91–107; and Dulac and Reno, 'L'humanisme vers 1400', pp. 161–78. It must be noted that Christine characterizes herself in the dedication to the Duke as a compiler, not author (Christine de Pizan, *Epistre Othea*, ed. by Parussa, p. 505, l. 35), perhaps contributing to Scrope's error.

⁵⁶ Scrope also differs from his colleague William Worcester, whose annotation relegated Christine to a convent, completely distant from political influence, and remarked that Christine

What is most remarkable about the revisionist account is that Scrope constructs an exemplum to persuade readers of the work's legitimate ethical value, in which he grants Christine authority as a counsellor. He states that the book was given to the Duke *so that* through his deeds he 'flowrid and rengnyd in grete worship and renounne of chevalry' (p. 123, ll. 5–6).⁵⁷ Therefore, when he promotes Jean's achievements in chivalry, policy, and spirituality (p. 123, l. 6–19), he does not simply praise the masculine and ignore the feminine. Rather, he advertises the work's content as crucial to producing an ideal prince: Christine and Jean constitute contemporary, successful versions of Othea and Hector. His portrayal of Christine mistakenly denies her authorship and fits her into the more expected role as patroness, but it retains her agency as an intercessory adviser: no matter who composed the book, her desire to influence political behaviour caused its production, and the *Othea* represents her intervention into the masculine world of political affairs. As the named intermediary between the authoritative wisdom of anonymous 'doctors' and the politically active princes of her age, Christine is still fully identifiable with Othea offering counsel to Prince Hector. More importantly, she fulfils a role that Scrope hopes to emulate: the effective counsellor.

Additionally, Scrope's fiction of male authorship makes gendered authority a more tangible issue in every chapter because it shifts the reader's perception of speaking voices in the *texte*, *glose*, and *allegorie*. Scrope's translation does not deviate significantly from Christine's content — her positive representations of women remain intact — but the context for reading them has changed. Whereas Christine's format represents the *texte* as the voice of a pagan woman (Othea) followed by the interpretations of a Christian woman (Christine) who cites male authorities, Scrope's preface splits the chapter components along gender lines. Othea's letter provides the *texte*, but the *glose* and *allegorie* are supposedly authoritative responses written by male University scholars.⁵⁸ This structure might seem to minimize women's intellectual capabilities, but, on the contrary, it develops

was named as author even though she commissioned works (in his view) (Worcester, *The Boke of Noblesse*, ed. by Nichols, pp. 54–55). Finke, 'The Politics of the Canon', pp. 27–31, argues that even Worcester's presentation of Christine aligns with medieval concepts of authorship and that both Scrope and Worcester exhibit less misogynist attitudes than modern readers initially assume. Hindman, *Christine de Pizan's Epistre Othea*, p. 13, observes that some French readers similarly claimed that Christine commissioned the works.

⁵⁷ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s. v. *that* (conj.), def. 1, indicates that the conjunction can have the causal force of 'so that'.

⁵⁸ Although Scrope's preface lists as sources the male poets, 'Vyrgyl, Ovyde, Omer & othir' (Scrope, *The Epistle of Othea*, ed. by Bühler, p. 123, ll. 22–23), within the work itself, the poetic *textes* nevertheless remain Othea's retellings of classical narratives, which are then glossed by 'male' voices.

continuities across male and female advising voices, not disparities. Unlike, for example, the glosses to the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, which attempt to counter with morality the boisterous Wife's questionable use of authorities,⁵⁹ in Scrope's narrative of production, men's glosses uphold what 'Othea seith'. Carolyn Dinshaw has argued that the *Wife of Bath's Tale* allegorizes the ideal relationship between text (literal, feminine) and gloss (spiritual, masculine) as one of reciprocity analogous to the *Tale's* mutually satisfactory marriage, and that Chaucer sought to critique the masculine, totalizing methods of patriarchal reading to 'acknowledge, even solicit, feminine desire'.⁶⁰ The fulfilment of that ideal can be found in Scrope's work: in structure and content, his translation stages a complex negotiation between male and female voices in which women's advice and men's interpretations mutually support each other on moral, political, and spiritual topics.⁶¹ Ultimately, the same fiction that glosses over Christine's authorship also conceives of 'male clerks' repeatedly echoing and endorsing women's counsel.

In fact, the 'masculine'-authored *allegorie* stands apart from both *texte* and *glose* to clarify a mode of thinking distinct not only from Othea's perspective but also from the 'masculine' views of the *glose*.⁶² For instance, in Chapter 36, *texte* and *glose* are generally similar. The *texte* urges the reader to think about Hector's 'trewe cosin' Memnon, who is always ready to aid him, so Hector must equally 'love' Memnon and take up arms if he is in need (p. 47, ll. 1–4). It reveals Othea's awareness of masculine political favours: one must maintain kin relations in anticipation of future needs. The *glose* reiterates the *texte's* claim, provides more detail about Hector and Memnon (including Memnon's attempt to avenge Hector's death), and generalizes the benefits of treating kin well (p. 47, ll. 6–23). Overall, it emphasizes strong friendships as politically advantageous, confirming and supporting the *texte*. By contrast, the *allegorie* differs completely in its interpretation of the 'trewe cosin' as the God whom Christians must serve in order that He will repay their devotion after death (p. 47, l. 25–p. 48, l. 5). The interpretation uses allegoresis to draw on the literal *texte* and moral *glose*, but it does not invalidate

⁵⁹ See Caie, 'The Significance of the Early Chaucer Manuscript Glosses', pp. 353–57.

⁶⁰ Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, pp. 120–26.

⁶¹ I use 'voice' to refer to the gendering of Othea's letter as feminine and the parts written, according to Scrope, by male authors as masculine.

⁶² For a theological perspective that takes into account theologians' views of the world as 'feminine' and spiritual realm as 'masculine' see Green, 'On Translating Christine as a Philosopher', pp. 121–22, who argues that Christine seeks to dispel such hierarchical thinking and show the importance of the feminine in worldly and spiritual matters. Scrope presents this favourable view of femininity as if male clerks likewise endorsed it.

those predecessors. The effect is an aggregation of meanings, not the prioritizing of any one level of reading. A similar movement occurs in Chapter 20, in which the *texte* and *glose* assert the rudeness of the churls who harass Latona as she tries to drink from a river; she turns them into croaking frogs as punishment, and the moral lesson asserts the necessity of noble behaviours. The *allegorie* announces that the peasants turned to frogs exemplify the sin of avarice, requiring the reader to consider how an absence of gentility figures avarice. The most significant difference in interpretation comes not between the 'feminine' and 'masculine' sections of chapters, but instead between moral *glose* and spiritual *allegorie*. Women's voices give vital worldly and political advice, even if the spiritual level of interpretation requires a different hermeneutic approach.

But the female voice is not divorced from expressing spiritual lessons entirely, because the *texte* occasionally anticipates the *allegorie*. For instance, Chapter 17's depiction of Athamas emphasizes at each level the importance of avoiding wrath, including the *texte*'s admonition, 'Therefore greete ire I defende the pleyne' (p. 27, l. 30); Chapter 51 warns 'Governe thou thi tonge aftir Saturne' (p. 63, l. 22) and stresses the importance of careful speech in spiritual and temporal dealings; and Chapter 61 uses the first fall of Troy to caution the reader of impending punishments for offences against man and God. The three sections of these chapters do not significantly differ in their messages, only the grounds that support them. The female voice of the *texte* offers plain, direct speech, while the masculine responses expand on Othea's words and cite authorities to arrive at the same conclusion. Reinterpretation does not constitute the rejection of the *texte*'s message. Instead, as in Christine's original, Othea's words are legitimized completely by two differing strands of masculine authority on the moral-political and spiritual levels. The important distinction is that Scrope's fiction of the work's origins presents male clerical writers as producing and thereby validating this correspondence between feminine and masculine perspectives.

The treatment of the Cumaean Sibyl is particularly provocative in light of Scrope's newly gendered chapter voices, because it shows male voices emphatically underscoring the importance of listening to wise women. The *texte* advises the reader to accept Othea's advice, drawing a parallel between her and the Sibyl who converted Augustus. Both the 'male-authored' *glose* and *allegorie* emphasize that 'trouthe noblith him þat pronounceth it' and 'good wordis & good techingis is to preise, of what persoonne þat seith it', effectively authorizing Othea and the Sibyl (p. 120, ll. 10–12, 16–17). The *allegorie* goes further to insist that the wise man willingly seeks out wisdom and 'he considerith not what he is þat spekith, but what þat is þe which he seip' (p. 120, ll. 22–23), pointing to the ruler's obligation to take counsel as authorization for any adviser's speech. Like Christine,

Scrope defends Othea's example and uses her to validate *all* good counsel based on the Sibyl's precedent, but with the added force of direct 'clerical' support, not just Christine's appropriation of clerical citations. This presentation of the Sibyl and women's authority originally legitimated Christine's literary invention, and Scrope seeks to do the same for his *Epistle*. He shares with Christine a position outside the standard sources of intellectual and theological authority, and the female authorship of the *Othea* offers a point of identification through which Scrope justifies his position outside traditional models of education and authority.⁶³ However, Scrope does not build himself up by casting Christine down, nor does he reject or deny the distinct images of women's wisdom that appear within the work itself. Instead, he identifies with Christine and Othea as exemplars who illustrate that, despite his lack of traditional authority, he can intervene to offer authoritative advice to more powerful recipients.

Scrope's translation does not relegate women to the periphery of the intellectual world or restore antifeminist perspectives. Minerva and Penthesilea receive praise for their military prowess, and Io and Galen's Cleopatra remain important examples of women's intellectual contributions to letters and medicine. Significantly, Scrope also maintains Christine's deflections of typical antifeminist readings. Pasiphaë receives the same generous treatment as in Christine's original, as a woman who loved not a bull but a man of 'foul condicions' and who should not be taken to indicate that all women are just as foolish (p. 57, l. 1). Similarly following Christine, in Chapter 98 on Circe, whom antifeminist writings identified with idolatry, hypocrisy, bestiality, and the Whore of Babylon, Scrope pointedly redirects attention away from the enchantress herself and onto Ulysses's men as hypocritical knights. Even without the visual programme that Marilynn Desmond and Pamela Sheingorn have argued lauds Circe's ability to stop masculine aggression and defend her city,⁶⁴ Christine's textual elements critique moral weakness in the Greek soldiers. Although Christine acknowledges that Circe may signify 'un dame plaine de vagueté' (a woman full of inconstancy) who kept the men peacefully like swine (Ch. 98, ll. 22–23), she displaces the majority of negative connotations onto Circe's land rather than her character. Initially, she warns:

Eschever dois *le port Circés*
Ou les chevaliers Ulixés
 Furent tous en porcs convertis;
 Souviegne toy de ses partis. (Ch. 98, ll. 2–5, emphasis mine)

⁶³ Summit, *Lost Property: The Woman Writer and English Literary History*, pp. 72–74, 78.

⁶⁴ Desmond and Sheingorn, *Myth, Montage, and Visuality*, p. 170.

You ought to avoid the *port of Circe*, where Ulysses's knights were all transformed into pigs; remember her coasts.

The *port Circés* is clearly a place *where* (*ou*) the action occurs, not Circe's behaviour.⁶⁵ The *glose* then clarifies that the name 'Circés' represents 'un terre ou une contree ou les chevaliers furent mis en orde et villaine prison' (a land or a country where the knights were put in a filthy and repulsive prison). What Christine underscores, however, is the failings of Ulysses's men, who are 'chevaliers errans c'est a entendre suivans les armes' (knights errant, that is to understand following arms) and 'malicieux et avisez' (malicious and crafty) (Ch. 98, ll. 23–26).⁶⁶ Christine suggests that her reader should not imitate *them*: 'Et pour ce dit au bon chevalier que a tel sejour ne se doit arrester' (And thus it is said to the good knight that in such a respite he should not tarry) (Ch. 98, ll. 26–28). The defining moral lesson draws on the actions of the Greeks, who are implicated as *choosing* to remain under Circe's influence, which instructs the good knight to make morally responsible choices or accept the consequences. In the process of making this point, Christine also pressures the reader to reject the traditional antifeminist reading of Circe and recognize Ulysses's men, who lacked the moral fibre to reject luxury and follow arms as good knights errant should, as the true exemplars of hypocrisy.

Scrope's text confirms the plausibility of this reading of Christine's chapter. First, he warns the reader against the 'swyne of Circes', in the first line (p. 117, l. 18). He also refers to 'Circes' as 'It' when he provides the *glose* information that 'It may be undirstande be a lande or a contre', but 'she' when he refers to her as a lady or queen (p. 118, l. 4–6), destabilizing what is identifiable as 'Circes' and reducing the possibility that Circe herself might emerge as the protagonist. Perhaps most importantly, the *allegorie's* final analysis asserts that 'Circesis swyne may we take for ypocrisy' (p. 118, l. 14). Even if 'swyne' occurs both times as the result of misreading French 'port' for 'porc', Scrope is a competent translator, and the term had to seem to make sense under the circumstances.⁶⁷ More directly

⁶⁵ Following Desmond and Sheingorn, *Myth, Montage, and Visuality*, p. 143, I interpret 'ses partis' as referring to the land rather than Circe's character. See also, Godefroy and others, *Lexique de l'ancien français*, s.v. *part*, def. 3.

⁶⁶ The translation of 'avisez' as 'crafty' derives from Christine de Pizan, *Letter of Othea*, trans. by Chance, p. 118; Scrope, *The Epistle of Othea*, ed. by Bühler, p. 118, l. 9, supports the interpretation of the term in a negative sense by using 'noyous' (wicked).

⁶⁷ Scrope rarely makes major errors, and his mistakes typically still reflect a plausible interpretation of the original. For example, in Chapter 22 on Pyramus and Thisbe, he first correctly translates the French 'morier' as a 'white-thorn' tree (Scrope, *The Epistle of Othea*, ed. by Bühler, p. 50, l. 5); but at the conclusion of the narrative, when this tree would have been turned

than Christine herself, he identifies 'Circe's swine', the Greek indolent knights, as guilty of hypocrisy and allows the sorceress to fade into the background rather than dominate as a malicious force.

With the one exception of adding that Othea's knowledge represents the wisdom of 'man or woman' instead of woman alone, Scrope does not tamper with Christine's defences of women or strong women characters (p. 6, l. 19).⁶⁸ Yet considering how Othea and Christine function as exemplars for Scrope's own literary activity, his addition of 'man' could well indicate his attempt to insert himself into Christine's validation of counsellors.⁶⁹ Rather than define masculine authority against women, he identifies with women's marginalized position and authorizes his own work by placing himself within the tradition of unexpected yet accurate authorities on chivalric virtues constituted by Christine, Othea, and the Sibyl. He ultimately presents himself as imitating Christine and women counsellors, not as defining masculine authority against women's inferiority.

Scrope's dedication of one manuscript to a 'hye princesse' also evidences how he brings women into chivalric discourses. That manuscript suggests that the chivalric and political content is suitable reading for women, because there are no substantial revisions for a woman reader outside of changing the gender of the dedicatee to female.⁷⁰ One might ask whether the 'hye princesse' ought to iden-

black in token of the children's deaths, 'la mure' (another form for *morier*) becomes for Scrope 'the wal' (*le mur*), evoking the wall that separated the lovers' homes. He translates inaccurately, but he understands the sense that a major image of the story has been transformed into a symbol of mourning. The mistranslation in Circe functions similarly to provide his interpretation of the narrative.

⁶⁸ There is nothing in Scrope that compares to the alterations made by the *Bibell*-poet, for instance (see below), and Scrope's two potentially problematic gender-related changes seem to result from error rather than intent. In one case, he refers to Phoebe (Ch. 10) as 'He' and 'him', a mistake that may derive from confusion about classical mythology and/or a transference from the previous chapter on Apollo, who is also called Phoebus. He later refers to Echo (Ch. 86) with a masculine pronoun, but only in the *texte*, and then only in the S and L manuscripts; the M manuscript corrects the *texte*'s errors to 'hire', and in all manuscripts, the *glose* clearly identifies her as 'a womman of fayrie' (Scrope, *The Epistle of Othea*, ed. by Bühler, p. 104, l. 20) or 'fayre woman' (L, fol. 64^v). See also Chance, 'Gender Subversion and Linguistic Castration', p. 168.

⁶⁹ In fact, the L manuscript is copied from Scrope's first translation for Fastolf, and it contains the variant reading of 'man & woman' (fol. 5^v). Without putting too much pressure on this idiosyncratic witness, the variant may suggest that Scrope initially placed 'man' alongside 'woman' instead of opposing the two, or at least that 'man *and* woman' occurred to the copyist as an acceptable reading. See Scrope, *The Epistle of Othea*, ed. by Bühler, pp. xxiii, p. 6 n. 19.

⁷⁰ Bühler's edition gives running notes on manuscript variants, which largely consist of variant spellings, minor omissions, and negligible word substitutions.

tify with Hector and Jean (as male recipients would) or with Othea and Christine (based on gender). On the one hand, a reader of high status may naturally identify with Hector as Othea's pupil, especially given that Scrope inserts praise of her 'good ladishipe' in place of his other recipients' 'mankyndlynes' (p. 4, l. 14) that can be analogized to Hector's worthiness. He situates his woman reader in the same role as the male recipients who should identify with Hector and the exemplars, and 'chivalric' behaviours become social virtues that she could perform. On the other hand, the models of Othea and Christine offer potential women readers — whether the princess or the Paston women — the means to authorize their own interventions into political discourses that tended to exclude women's voices. In any case, the work and this dedication in particular invite women into the conversation about the appropriate behaviour of rulers and knights, and Scrope portrays women's wisdom as essential to masculine intellectual and political discourses. Moreover, Scrope's close translation of the *Othea* and retention of Christine's revisionary views of women throw into sharp relief the numerous innovations and adaptations that appear in the *Lytill Bibell of Knyghthod*.

'Armed with prudent polecye': Arming and Ordering a Knightly Reader in the Lytill Bibell of Knyghthod

[S]o seythe prudence to þe good knyght þat he schold notte ffonne nor soute uppon no woman by þe meane of love, in suche maner þat he leue to foulloo & seke prowes & wurschyp of armes, to wyche he is bound by þe ordre of knyghthod, & þefore seyth þe philosophre Aptalyn: It is ful inconvenient for a prince to ffonne uppon a thyng reprovabale. (*Bibell*, p. 44, ll. 28–34)⁷¹

To the reader familiar with Christine's positive views of women, the most striking aspect of the *Lytill Bibell of Knyghthod* is the insertion of the antifeminist attitudes that she sought to supplant. Not only does the poet restore traditional readings, like Circe exemplifying hypocrisy, but he also adds subtle commentary like the above interpretation of the Pygmalion myth as warning the knight not to become infatuated with women. Christine had focused on the knight's fantasy

⁷¹ All quotations derive from Gordon's edition, in consultation with BL, MS Harley 838. I have made occasional corrections to Gordon's text (which I identify with a note), and I have silently expanded manuscript abbreviations and regularized capitals. The name 'Aptalyn' appears in Christine, Scrope, and the *Bibell*, but the source and philosopher's identity are unknown; see Scrope, *The Epistle of Othea*, ed. by Bühler, p. 145n.

of desire, cautioning him to avoid becoming besotted with a 'fait image' (crafted image) and lecherous desires, not women *per se* (Ch. 22, ll. 39–42). The *Bibell*-poet asserts that knights must reject women as reprehensible: his grammatical construction clearly aligns 'woman' with 'a thyng reprovabyl'. Such a misogynist claim had to occur to him as an 'acceptable' translation of the French. The subtle shift still lays blame on the knight's choice, but it makes women (as well as lecherous fantasies) less desirable. There is a degree of misogyny in the poet's view of women, exhibited also in his re-gendering of pride as a female attribute in his version of Narcissus, a 'meyd wyche was so proude of her bewte þat sche had all oþer wymen in dispyte' (p. 35, ll. 12–13).

What makes the *Bibell* a fascinating work is that antifeminism itself does not animate his loose translation, which should more appropriately be called an adaptation. Rather, the poet's original 168-line Proem reveals his abiding and coherent interest in the educational strategies of Christine's exempla. If he produces a totalizing reading of her multivalent chapters, he does so to assert a prescriptive morality in which both male and female protagonists are readily identifiable as either good or bad. His simplifications paradoxically produce a more complex and open-minded view of gender, as readers are encouraged to evaluate exemplars based on individually contingent circumstances, not begin from a negative or positive bias toward either sex as a category. And his conception of Othea demonstrates that he identifies with her thoroughly as clearly distanced from negative attitudes toward women; she becomes the means through which he attempts to control the reaction of his implied non-aristocratic audience and brings Christine's work into praxis with shifting late medieval English perspectives on man's ability to combat Fortune. His Proem holds the key to his adaptation of the *Othea*, and it demonstrates that the *Bibell* is a radical adaptation that attempts to resolve ambiguities in Christine's original and in mirrors for princes more broadly in order to drive home the absolute necessity of virtuous behaviour to his readers.

The *Bibell*'s Proem and Poetic Authority

From the outset, the *Bibell*-poet distinguishes himself from his source at the same time that he demonstrates his investment in Christine's form. His unique Proem prepares the reader to see the chapter components as related to broader three-part natural, religious, and social systems such as the three dimensions of earth, the three souls of man ('vegetatyffe, sensatyve, & intellective'), the three estates (labourers, knights, and clerics), and the three degrees of existence (posi-

tive, comparative, and superlative) (p. 1, l. 1–p. 4, l. 10).⁷² In each system, all three elements work together to maintain order, as in the estates system: the labourers provide the foundation, the knightly class figures virtuous living, and the clerics motivate the others against sin (p. 2, l. 8–p. 3, l. 13). The Proem explains how the tripartite chapter structures — of *texte*, *glose*, and *moralite* (replacing Christine's term, *allegorie*, with the specific English term for the spiritual interpretation)⁷³ — function like the other systems he describes:

Poetrie, philosophye, & theologie,
 Of þis trine wey havynge governauns,
 Þus kn[y]ghthod, armed with prudent polecy,
 In þis present lyff hym-selff to avaunce,
 & to hys soule gyffe gostely sustenaunce
 Be morelycioun of clerkly conjecture,
 Yff he þe steppis wyll foulo of þis lecture. (p. 6, ll. 7–13)

'Poetrie, philosophye, & theologie' provide individual sources of authority for chapter components, and each element comprises part of a trinity ('trine wey') that should govern a knight so that he will be 'armed with prudent polecy', advance himself in the world, and give sustenance to his soul (p. 6, ll. 7–9). The poet has chosen an apt phrase, since 'polecy' evokes statecraft or military conduct — preserving the association with Christine's original mirror for princes — but the term also may refer to spiritual conduct or, more generally, to practical wisdom.⁷⁴ In speaking of arming the reader, the poet clearly lays out the theory and purpose behind his efforts. His content expresses an Aristotelian reading of Christine's work, potentially informed by the *Ethics*, which contains both the reference to 'vegetatyffe, sensatyve, & intellictive' souls and the argument that practising virtues can protect one against misfortune.⁷⁵

⁷² As Gordon observes, the reading 'vegetatyffe' is doubtful: the letters 'veg' and 'atyffe' are clearly visible in the manuscript, but the intermediary letters seem to have been rendered 'll' (*A Lytil Bibell of Knyghthod*, ed. by Gordon, p. 1n). Still, the sense is clear.

⁷³ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v., *moralite* (n.), def. 2d.

⁷⁴ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v., *policie* (n.), defs 1, 2, 3.

⁷⁵ The concept of three souls appears in a number of ethical, political texts, including Aristotle's *De Anima* and *Nichomachean Ethics*, and Giles of Rome's *Quodlibeta*; the *Ethics* also asserts that virtues protect against ill fortune. The poet also shows an Aristotelian preference for defining virtues as naturally ordered. See Rigby, 'Aristotle for Aristocrats and Poets', pp. 259–62, 270, who demonstrates that late medieval English writers were acquainted with Aristotle's ethical theories, which circulated widely, especially after Nicole Oresme's translations; see also Green, 'On Translating Christine as a Philosopher', p. 127, who notes the potential correspondence

The last stanzas of the Proem reveal more about the worldview that specifically governs his adaptation of Othea's letter to Hector:

To whom, in hys yong a[ge...] (Hector)
 Þe lady Othea of prude[ns þe goddess]
 Sent an epistle of noble poetrye
 To yeve hym courage to chivallrous prowes,
 Wheroff þe text fouloythe her expresse followeth
 In balad ryme & off hyt þe glose,
 Wyche þe moralite is made to yow in prose.

And to declare þis mater oppynly
 Unto þe wlgar, pleyn to understandyng
 Off every wyght desyrous for to styte
 Þe whele off fortune to þe suppreme wonnyng, dwelling place
 Language rethorically fro me sequestryng,
 The wordes of þis Epystle in reprove of synne,
 Pleynly to wryte thus, I now begynne. (p. 7, l. 17–p.8, l. 7)⁷⁶

Through the use of such phrases as 'oppynly', 'pleyn to understandyng', and 'Pleynly to wryte thus', the *Bibell*-poet indicates his goal of articulating lessons as clearly and completely as possible; he sets in opposition this direct, readily understandable writing from a more stylized 'Language rethorically' that he cannot access (p. 8, ll. 1–7).⁷⁷ Even so, his use of 'balad ryme' (p. 7, l. 22) or rhyme royal for the poetic *textes* indicates that, although he has pragmatic aims, the project was a poetic enterprise demanding an elaborate aesthetic form. Strikingly, he underscores the results possible not simply for a king but for 'every wyght', any reader, and in its treatment of Fortune, the *Bibell* straddles distinctions between 'aristocratic' advice texts and more general 'conduct literature'.⁷⁸ Fortune's wheel has long been recognized as a key symbol in medieval literature, particularly in *de casibus* narratives that warn rulers against unexpected tragedies. Late medieval English writers like Lydgate combine the threat of *de casibus* narratives with mir-

between Christine's ideas of Fortune and Aristotle's *Ethics*.

⁷⁶ The brackets indicate Gordon's plausible completions of illegible lines in the manuscript.

⁷⁷ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v., *openli* (adv.), def. 2b; s.v., *plain(e)* (adj.), def. 4b.a.; s.v., *plainli(e)* (adv.), def. 1a; s.v., *rethorical* (adj.), def. a. Watson, 'Theories of Translation', p. 85, has argued that Lydgate's 'plain' means 'full' or 'complete' instead of 'clear'. The *Bibell*-poet may use the term similarly, but his practice demonstrates a search for clarity as well as completeness.

⁷⁸ See, for example, the introduction to Ashley and Clark, *Medieval Conduct*, pp. x–xv.

rors for princes exempla to ostensibly advise readers how virtuous behaviour may forestall Fortune; in particular, these hybrid texts argue that man's rational action is efficacious in the world.⁷⁹ In the *Bibell*, Fortune becomes man's antagonist, and Othea demands that anyone interested in halting Fortune's influence must battle her with virtuous behaviours. However, rather than address an aristocratic audience, the *Bibell*-poet conceives of an audience of the 'wlgar', a popular, unlearned readership, making this work a key example of the repackaging of the *Othea* for a non-aristocratic audience.⁸⁰ The *Bibell*-poet is more ambitious than Scrope: he does not shy from placing Christine's work in a clearer didactic frame, or from drastically altering her chapters to suit his purposes, something Scrope's translation is too close to permit. The *Bibell* functions as a practical manual of advice for even lower-status audiences, and the poet's attitudes toward that audience, as well as toward Fortune, account for his transformation of Christine's sophisticated exempla into a more prescriptive and straightforward discourse.

The *Bibell*-poet's simplifications make a concerted effort to guide the audience to recognize the interrelationship among all three interpretive levels of a chapter. I refer to his thoughtful attempts to create a single, unified meaning as his quest for 'exemplary cohesion', a strategy that recurs in two forms throughout the *Bibell*. The more basic type appears when Christine gestures toward the 'many expositions' for fables (e.g., Ch. 82 on Hermaphroditus) or calls attention to other examples (e.g., by comparing Troy to Tunis in Ch. 97), but the *Bibell*-poet eliminates these additional interpretive choices and focuses only on one fundamental quality or lesson. The more complex type affects the content of chapters substantially and is best illustrated with a brief example. Christine exemplifies Busiris as a cruel king whose bloodlust was contrary to God, nature, and all good-

⁷⁹ Strohm, *Politique: Languages of Statecraft Between Chaucer and Shakespeare*, pp. 4–5, 89–104; see also my discussion above, pp. 123–25.

⁸⁰ The reference to the 'wlgar' might signify his translation of these materials into the English vernacular (Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v., *vulgar(e)* (n.), but he never elsewhere acknowledges that he produces a translation; 'wlgar' is instead an adjective used poetically as a substantive (Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v., *vulgar(e)* (adj.), defs a, b. As a compilation, BL, MS Harley 838 seems to have had an educational purpose: it contains explanations of heraldic symbols, a rudimentary bestiary, brief collections of hunting terms, and genealogies of kings. See British Library, *A Catalogue of the Harleian Manuscripts in the British Museum*, I, p. 454. Scrope may have had similar didactic intentions, for his preface states that the work will 'to doctrine enforme and to lerne every man no[w] lyvyng in this world how he schuld be a knyht exercising and doing the dedys of armys gostly, for ever-lastyng victorie and helthe of the soule' (p. 123, ll. 31–34), but he does not introduce any new language about combatting Fortune or earthly misfortune explicitly, and he makes no alterations to the substance of the *Othea*.

ness; her *allegorie* views his murders and other crimes as demonstrations of the commandment ‘Thou shalt not steal’ (*Othea*, Ch. 41, ll. 2–20), forestalling the easy association with ‘Thou shalt not kill’. Although her *texte* refers to Busiris as committing greater evil than thieves (‘qui trop fu plus mauvais que lierres’, Ch. 41, l. 3), the overall incongruity forces readers to ponder how murder illustrates the prohibition against theft. The *Bibell*-poet does not mend the incongruity entirely, but he underscores a single idea that binds the chapter together: unnaturalness. His *texte* introduces Busiris’s ‘fals naturall’ (not in Christine’s original) and prefigures the *glose* and *moralite* (p. 68, l. 18). The *glose* focuses on knighthood by echoing Christine’s assessment that Busiris was ‘ageyn all nature’, but it adds that he was also ‘ageyn all bounteouse prowes of chivalrye’ (p. 69, ll. 2–3). This leads into the *moralite*’s central claim that Busiris is ‘condiciouned ageyn kynd’ (as in Christine), but the poet additionally parallels Busiris’s violation of natural law with the ‘unleful’ [unlawful] theft of others’ goods (p. 69, ll. 6–9). His small, extra emphasis on unnatural behaviour forges connections among *texte*, *glose*, and *moralite* to impose order on Christine’s ambiguous content. These simplified exempla attempt to make the *Bibell* more accessible to readers who may have less leisure or desire for intense contemplation than Christine’s primary audiences. The impulse toward ‘exemplary cohesion’ streamlines the chapters and compels the poet to be more direct in his identification of positive and negative exemplars, which in turn transforms Othea into a more authoritative, insistent adviser.

These alterations produce anxiety in the poet who represents himself in the Proem as an incompetent author. Such modesty *topoi* that deny the writer’s authority are conventional, but the focus on his *poetic* ability is striking when compared to his source.⁸¹ Christine represents herself as unworthy due to her lack of knowledge and status as a woman (Prol., ll. 17–56, 68). Significantly, she never denigrates the quality or pedagogical value of her poetry, calling it, ‘Bel a ouyr et meilleur a entendre’ (Beautiful to hear and better to understand/heed) (Prol., l. 59). In contrast, the *Bibell*-poet expresses a simultaneous crisis of authority and poetic talent. He spends two stanzas worrying over his capability to treat moral and spiritual matters eloquently:

Off þis mysty mater to þe declaracioun,
 Goddes grace helpyng, now wyll I procede,
 Wyche is to me tymorose but under supportacioun
 And favorable eid of hem þat schall hytt reed. *aid*

⁸¹ Although we cannot be certain that the poet had access to Christine’s Prologue, my ongoing research for a new critical edition of the *Bibell* shows that it is at least plausible, because the closest extant manuscript to his source contains the Prologue to Louis d’Orleans.

For, ever in my hert soore I me drede
 My rude wytt to deele with þis mater hawte,
 Lest þat in þe makyng be found som defaute.

lofty

Wyche to my symplenes a reproche schold bee,
 Pat I, off presompcioun, schold uppon me take
 So hye divinous mater in moralite,
 In ryme or in prose oper for to make,
 Wher I, voyd of eloquence, am hyt to undertake,
 Wyche schold cause men thynke in me abusoun,
 &, for my grett folye, to have me in derysoun.
 (p. 6, l. 14–p. 7, l. 2)

The ‘mysty mater’, ‘mater hawte’, and ‘hye divinous mater in moralite’ refer to the unified moralization of ‘Poetry, philosophye & theologie’ in the previous stanza (p. 6, ll. 10–13). The poet contrasts this lofty project with his limited intellectual abilities: the work inspires fear in him (‘is to me tymorose’) (p. 6, l. 16), he sorely dreads his ‘rude wytt’ (p. 6, ll. 18–19), and he fears rebuke for his ignorance or inadequacy (‘sympleness’) (p. 6, l. 21). He further casts doubt on his poetic skills by describing himself as concerned with faults in his poetic composition (‘makyng’) (p. 6, l. 20), as ‘voyd of eloquence’ (p. 6, l. 25), and, later, as possessed of a ‘symple wytt off cunningg to barreyn’ (p. 7, l. 8).⁸² He generates the image of a timid poet, fearful that his work will be reproached or ridiculed, who must steel his nerves to complete an important project. He defers authority for the work to ‘Goddess grace helpyng’ (p. 6, l. 15) and the ‘proteccioun | Off theologiens’ in the *moralites* (p. 7, ll. 3–5), who will allow him to achieve his task. His practice bears out his uncertainty about his theological capacities, since the majority of his alterations appear in the *texte* and *glose*, which he aligns with Othea’s authority, while he rarely makes significant changes to the *moralite*.⁸³ His claims to write from an insecure position may resemble the popular fifteenth-century modesty *topos* of poetic dullness, but it also suggests his anxieties about writing poetry that is both beautiful and authoritative.⁸⁴

Yet the *Bibell*-poet seeks not only to disclaim responsibility for his poetry but also to spur his audience to become involved readers. He announces that

⁸² Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v., *maken* (v. 1), def. 5a.

⁸³ The poet occasionally makes minor alterations to the *moralite* to provide additional glosses without altering the overall meaning, as in the example of Busiris above. See also *A Lytil Bibell of Knyghthod*, ed. by Gordon, pp. xxxix–xli.

⁸⁴ On the dullness *topos*, see Lawton, ‘Dullness and the Fifteenth Century’, pp. 762–93.

his achievement is dependent on the ‘supportacioun | And favorable eid of hem þat schall hytt reed’ (p. 6, ll. 14–17). In this evocation of the reader’s goodwill, he envisions the reception of his work in terms of another three-fold apparatus that consists of the divine authority (‘Goddess grace’) that underpins the material, his composition or ‘makyng’, and the supportive aid of his readers. This self-awareness suggests his sophisticated understanding that his success is contingent upon conveying his work in a form that his audience can accept. Elizabeth Allen has theorized that exemplary texts ‘express an aspiration toward exact alignment among authorial purpose, narrative form, and audience response’, a concept toward which the *Bibell*-poet’s Proem aims clearly.⁸⁵ The representation of his own supposed incompetence places his reader in a more powerful position that serves the pedagogical goal of inviting the reader to engage the work’s lessons — which the poet has streamlined to make obvious and easier to apprehend. He has performed the difficult, interpretive labour of translation and clarification, but he still emphasizes the reader’s need to engage with the text.

Nevertheless, since the poet has denied his own capabilities, asserting the authority of Othea and her advice further justifies the work. The Proem seeks to balance his anxieties with the proclamations that the work derives authority from its moral contents and theological commentary, all of which the poet claims will allow the reader to stall Fortune’s wheel. If these are not motivation enough for the reader to take seriously the work’s advice, he provides additional reminders within his adaptation itself through the character of Othea. As in Christine’s original, the *Bibell* defines Othea first as a goddess, then as a woman, and as an exemplar of prudence. Christine notes that, with respect to Hector, ‘Par Othea nous prendrons la vertu de prudence et sagece dont lui mesmes fu aournez’ (By Othea, we may understand the virtue of prudence and wisdom with which he himself was equipped) (Ch. 1, ll. 102–103). Christine toys with personification, but the individualizing name and her insistence on Othea’s status as human woman, not goddess, prevent Othea from becoming an abstraction by tying her to human history. The *Bibell*-poet simply eliminates the possibility of personification. He seemingly mistranslates ‘lui mesmes’ to apply to Othea, leading to her characterization as the ‘verteu of prudence and wysdom, whereoff þe same Othe[a] was replete & ffulfilled’ (p. 12, ll. 11–12). This shift suggests that she is named for her own virtues and omits any suggestion that she represents Hector’s internal virtues; she retains the external existence that is crucial for seeing her as a model counsellor and a point of identification for the poet. This Othea who is ‘replete

⁸⁵ Allen, *False Fables and Exemplary Truth*, p. 2.

& fulfilled' of prudence and wisdom stands in for the poet who expressed fear in the Proem that his work would earn him derision. Othea becomes his mouthpiece, his authoritative voice, and his legitimating model. Through alterations to her character, he continues to affirm the crucial nature of the *Bibell's* advice and seeks to motivate his readers to conform to the work's vision of moral behaviour. Exemplary cohesion and the new, forceful Othea become central to understanding the *Bibell*-poet's approach to exempla and to women in particular.

Exemplarity or Antifeminism? A New Othea

The troubling aspect of the *Bibell* is that the poet exhibits antifeminist tendencies that are shocking to readers familiar with Christine's work. While the added injunction against loving women in *Pygmalion* ties in more directly to the chapter's *moralite* against lechery, even exemplary cohesion does not fully explain the poet's alignment of women with 'reprovable' creatures that lead men to make inappropriate choices. Yet the predisposition to misogyny makes all the more notable the poet's favourable treatments of women counsellors, and his excoriations of villainous men call into question any assumption that antifeminism is his dominant purpose. Even if the poet embraces some antifeminist views, his overall treatment of women reveals not only sympathy for certain women but also a clear acceptance of Othea as an authoritative counsellor. Exemplary cohesion takes priority over any gendered viewpoint, and the work as a whole strongly argues that one must discard preset gender bias and instead judge each individual based on one's experience of specific situations.

At times, the poet's exemplary cohesion frustratingly relies on antifeminist commonplaces that oversimplify Christine's complex didactic structure and restore readings she sought to ignore or challenge. One prominent example is his treatment of Ino, who manipulated her husband into thinking his sons' inadequacies caused a famine, when in reality, she had caused the famine by sowing cooked seeds in a successful scheme to disinherit her stepsons so her own children could inherit. In Chapter 17, Christine introduces this narrative, yet she departs from the *Ovide moralisé*, in which both Athamas and Ino are driven to irrational anger and murder, to spotlight Athamas alone as illustrating wrath: he kills Ino and their children before committing suicide (Ch. 17, ll. 21–32). Christine acknowledges Ino's wickedness but casts her as a (deserving) victim while concentrating on Athamas as the exemplar.⁸⁶ In Chapter 99, Christine reinterprets the image of

⁸⁶ Desmond and Sheingorn, *Myth, Montage, and Visuality*, pp. 205–11, offer a more detailed treatment of Christine's specific departures from her source, including discussion of the

Ino sowing seeds, the focal point of *texte* and image, to make a powerful argument against wilful ignorance, without criticizing Ino directly. The *glose* identifies Ino's sowing cooked grain as signifying the lesson that 'belles raisons bien ordenees et sages auctoritez ne doivent estre dites a gens de rude entendement et qui ne les scevent entendre, car elles sont perdues' (good, well-ordered reasons and wise maxims should not be told to people of rude understanding and those who do not know how to understand them, because they are lost) (Ch. 99, ll. 9–11). Yet the two acts of sowing in *texte* and *glose* are not parallel because, unlike Christine's 'belles raisons', Ino's burnt seeds were destined never to grow and at best represent false knowledge. The analogy drawn by Aristotle that rounds out the *glose* is required to make sense of the relation between image and lesson: 'Aussi comme la pluye ne prouffite point au blé semé sus la pierre, aussi ne font les argumens a l'insapient' (Just as the rain does not benefit seed sown on rock, no more do arguments [benefit] the unwise man) (Ch. 99, ll. 12–14). Here, rain figures the good arguments, while the seeds sown on rock represent unwise or rude-witted people. The parallel should be drawn between Ino's cooked seed and Aristotle's seeds sown on rock that represent people of rude understanding: neither will grow, and no amount of cultivation or 'belles raisons' will change that fact. Christine reinterprets the vivid image of sowing burnt seed, divorcing it from Ino's malicious act to conceptualize ignorant people as lost causes, even when they are nurtured with wisdom.

Christine's chapter in fact warns against wilful resistance to learning, in one of her most innovative hermeneutic puzzles. Her *allegorie* citation of St Bernard castigates those who use ignorance as an excuse for their sins:

[P]lusieurs choses qui devoient estre sceues sont aucune foiz ignorees, ou par negligence de les savoir, ou par parece de les demander, ou par honte de les enquerir; et toute telle ignorence n'a nulle excusacion. (Ch. 99, ll. 23–27)

Many things that should be known are sometimes unknown, either through negligence in comprehending them or through laziness in asking about them, or through shame of investigating them; and all such ignorance has no excuse.

Through Bernard's words, Christine demands that her readers look *inward* at their own practices, urging them to take action and avoid the negligence, sloth, and shame that lead to wilful ignorance. The chapter's fragmented and complex structure places readers in a hermeneutic position from which they may either reconsider Ino's story and think deeply to reconcile the varying images of sowing, or recognize their own negligent and passive reading practices. Rather than indict Ino, Christine

image of sowing as original.

uses the chapter to expose the dangers of reading too quickly or searching for an easy fit between woman and negative trait. Wilful readers may assume that Ino exemplifies ignorance, but readers who actively interrogate the text already are defining themselves against ignorance by pressing beyond such antifeminist assumptions.

Ironically, the *Bibell*-poet demonstrates that he is among those wilful readers, because he focuses on Ino as an exemplar and overlooks the image of sowing that forms the chapter's moral core. In new additions, his *texte* suggests that Ino is more pleased with 'bable' (idle talk) than wisdom (p. 143, ll. 17–23), and his *glose* unleashes vehement disgust at her. He asserts that she 'dyd so folylly of her self-wyll & wold not be advertezed [informed] to þe contrarye be no counceyl, as most comenly is þe condicioun of all fooles to be selfe-wylled & hate to be conceyled or taught' (p. 144, ll. 1–4). He indicts her for being wilful and unwilling to listen to counsel, a critique that has no basis in Christine's *Othea*. Faced with a chapter against ignorance, he assumes the need for an exemplary idiot and uses Ino to embody 'ydeot3' and 'fole3' (p. 143, l. 17). His simplification offers a readily identifiable exemplar of a wilfully ignorant person against whom the reader can define himself. By lashing out against 'self-wyll' and the hatred of counsel, he reveals what he despises or perhaps fears most: someone who does not take advantage of offered wisdom. For the broad audience he imagines, a less complicated insistence upon avoiding ignorance may have seemed the path of least resistance, or this literal perspective, in fact, may be the only purpose for the chapter recognizable to the poet.⁸⁷

To take another brief example, the *Bibell*-poet attacks Circe in Chapter 98 as an exemplar for 'ylle disposicioun' (p. 143, l. 1), 'ylle governaunce' (p. 143, l. 2), and 'mysgovernauns' (p. 143, l. 5). Christine sought to displace this antifeminist view of Circe and set forth the reading that Ulysses's men were hypocritical knights who chose to rest in the luxury of Circe's lands and suspend their chivalric pursuits — a view that Scrope also endorses, as I noted above. The *Bibell*-poet simplifies the exemplum to focus on the same lesson that words must be consonant with deeds, but he also stifles the more complex methods by which Christine rightfully chastises Ulysses's lazy men: he eliminates the interpretation of 'Circus' as a country and omits negative references to Ulysses's men. His exemplary cohesion restores the expected focus on Circe as signifying hypocrisy,

⁸⁷ That the poet did not understand Christine's work or complex method is possible, as Gordon argues (*A 'Lytill Bibell of Knyghthod'*, ed. by Gordon, p. xlv). However, he judges the poet based on word for word substitutions, without taking into account the possibility that the poet adapted more broadly. Crucially, the *Bibell*-poet convincingly demonstrates that he understands the concept of exemplarity and the core didactic goals of the *Othea*.

which is well-attested in the *Ovide moralisé* and elsewhere, by letting the lesson take precedence over Christine's attention to shielding women from criticism.

The *Bibell*-poet's alterations, however, are not all as simple, and it becomes evident that his negative treatments of the previously mentioned women do not necessarily seek to 'correct' Christine's progressive views. When he treats Pasiphaë, he retains and even expands Christine's critique of antifeminist reading habits. As I noted previously, Christine deflects implications of bestiality by explaining that poetic exaggeration created the fable that Pasiphaë loved a bull to symbolize her inappropriate love of a man of vile condition (Ch. 45, l. 11). Her lust drives her to err, but, as Christine asserts, she must be regarded as an individual and not representative of her sex (Ch. 45, ll. 2–20). In what appears to be a return to misogynist perspectives, the *Bibell*-poet expresses extreme disgust at Pasiphaë's sexuality. In lines that have no precedent in the *Othea*, he introduces her by stating that she was 'folely disposed | & to lust innaturall sett hyr appetyte' (p. 73, ll. 16–17). She, like Busiris, is unnatural, but in treating Busiris, the poet drew on a term originally in Christine's chapter; here, to increase her shame, he introduces the concept of Pasiphaë's unnatural lust, or more precisely, *reintroduces* a common antifeminist view of her.⁸⁸ He then vividly describes her as a 'viciose [unchaste, depraved] woman off hyre body' and sinfully immoral through charges that she is 'ylle & viciously disposed' (p. 74, ll. 10–11).⁸⁹ He also adds to Christine's depiction of the affair's result by describing the son as not only possessed of the temper of a bull but also so 'combrous þat al þe contre exiled hym' (p. 74, l. 7). The child was fierce, strong, and so troublesome or immoral that his behaviour warranted forced removal from his homeland.⁹⁰ The poet thus conveys that choosing an inappropriate partner leads to immoral offspring; unnatural passions produce unnatural results. Even though he translates Christine's mythographic reading that counters typical charges of bestiality, he amplifies the scorn for Pasiphaë's choices.⁹¹

⁸⁸ See Blumenfeld-Kosinski, 'The Scandal of Pasiphaë', p. 310, on the *Ovide moralisé*'s emphasis on her unnatural behaviour.

⁸⁹ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v., *viciose* (adj.), defs 2ab; and s.v., *il(le)* (adj.), def. 1a; s.v., *viciousli* (adv.), def. 1. Christine acknowledges Pasiphaë's 'grant dissolucion' (Ch. 45, l. 8), but she does not dwell on it.

⁹⁰ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v., *combrous* (adj.), defs 3, 4b.

⁹¹ Of course, the increased criticism also reflects more significantly the depth of God's grace in the *moralite*, which replicates closely Christine's assertion that Pasiphaë signifies the wayward soul returned to God, which is greater cause for rejoicing than the salvation of the sinless soul; a more sinful Pasiphaë emphasizes a more forgiving God. Cf. Christine de Pizan, *Epistre Othea*, ed. by Parussa, ch. 45, ll. 25–38; *A Lytil Bibell of Knyghthod*, ed. by Gordon, p. 73, l. 23–p. 74, l. 16.

At the same time, though, he launches a more intense attack on universal assumptions about women's sexuality. When he expands Christine's quatrain to seven lines, after noting Pasiphaë's 'lust innaturall' (p. 73, ll. 16–17), the next five lines tackle another kind of unnatural folly:

Yet in þi kyndly resoun be hytt not supposed
 Þat every oþer woman be off þat delyte;
 For many be full vertuose, or els it were unryte.
 He is to unwyttý þat, for defaute off oon,
 Wyll þefore dyspyse woman everychoun. (p. 73, ll. 18–22)

To assume that all women are like Pasiphaë is against 'kyndly resoun', 'unryte', and 'unwyttý'. These word choices underscore the poet's critique of an antifeminist reader: 'kyndly resoun' indicates a natural intelligence; 'unryte' evokes the senses of 'unjustified', 'inappropriate', and 'logically unsound'; and 'unwyttý' suggests foolishness or a lack of knowledge.⁹² Taken together, these lines define the stereotype that all women are licentious as both unnatural and ignorant — a more thorough criticism of antifeminist prejudice than Christine's assertion that good women exist despite antifeminist writings. They also suggest that the poet's intensified disapproval of Pasiphaë comes from his view of her behaviours, not her gender.

The common thread in the *Bibell* chapter is the admonishment of behaviours defined as unnatural for both men and women, and there are implied dual meanings for those readers who aspire to the knightly class. The first places the reader in Pasiphaë's position, learning not to choose an unworthy partner out of 'lust innaturall' (p. 73, l. 17), because undesirable traits may be passed on to the next generation. Equally compelling is the additional option in which a male reader might identify with the man of 'rude condicioun' (p. 74, l. 3). The description of the man and offspring paint 'rude' or 'combrous' behaviours as undesirable, transmittable from generation to generation, and ultimately detrimental to the lineage, since the son is exiled. The chapter supports the *Bibell*-poet's stated goal of educating upwardly mobile audiences by alerting readers of either gender to avoid association with uncouth persons or behaviours. Understanding the target of critique as status-inappropriate behaviours, not gender, explains the *Bibell*-poet's addition of paradoxical anti-Pasiphaë and pro-women material.

The adaptation becomes all the more intriguing when the poet's revisions reduce the attack on a woman often vilified: Criseyde, the English name for the classical Briseis. He offers an almost Chaucerian reading that simultaneously pro-

⁹² Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v., *kindeli* (adv.), def. 1; s.v., *unright* (adj.), defs a, c, d; s.v., *unwitti* (adj.), defs a, b.

tests her fickleness and sympathizes with her as a woman whose agency is frustrated by male control. Christine initiates some of this sympathy by featuring Briseis as an object, rather than a subject-position with which the reader might identify. Briseis signifies a type of woman whom a knight should avoid loving because she possesses 'le cuer vilotier' (a roving heart), she is 'cointe et vague et attrayant' (proud, inconstant, and seductive), and she exemplifies the sin of vain-glory (Ch. 84, ll. 5, 8, 29–30). However, Briseis's behaviours largely are limited to responding to men's actions. She actively loves Troilus, but then her agency is reduced: her father Calchas 'fist tant' (did so much) to orchestrate her release to him in the Greek camp, where Diomedes 'fist tant' in his pursuit of Briseis that she loved him and forgot Troilus (Ch. 84, ll. 19–21). Her father and Diomedes each 'fist tant' that Briseis's subsequent actions are brought about by men's dealings more than by her own choices. Indeed, Christine's authoritative citation, 'Gard toy de la compaignie des mauvais que tu ne soies comme un d'eulx' (Guard yourself from the company of wicked people so that you do not become like one of them) (Ch. 84, ll. 25–27), plausibly excuses Briseis because she was unable to choose her associates. Although she creates room for sympathy, Christine emphasizes Briseis's unstable affections and betrayal, urging her reader to avoid associating with such a fickle woman (Ch. 84, ll. 21–25).

In English verse, even after Chaucer's sympathetic treatment of Criseyde, telling her story offers an opportunity for antifeminism: Lydgate portrays her as manipulative and evidence of a 'feminine nature' that values womanly pity over constancy, while Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* depicts her as defiled with fleshly lust and transformed into a disfigured leper as punishment for betraying Troilus.⁹³ But the *Bibell*-poet does not take the opportunity to increase criticism of Criseyde, and his account is startlingly kinder than even Christine's original. Like Christine, he urges the reader to avoid Criseyde's fickle heart, but he omits Christine's description of her as 'cointe et vague et attrayant'. He certainly demonstrates awareness that 'vague' (inconstant) has a negative connotation, for he translates 'une dame plaine de vagueté' (Ch. 98, ll. 22–23) when it refers to Circe as 'a lady or oþer woman of ylle disposicioun' (p. 142, l. 25–p. 143, l. 1), yet he avoids a plausibly similar negativity when he treats Criseyde. Instead, he replaces the latter two negative traits with more positive ones: 'Cryseyde was a

⁹³ Lydgate, *Troy Book*, ed. by Bergen, II.4820–69, shows her thoughtless manipulation of Diomedes, and 4.2132–77, laments the inconstancy of womanhood; Henryson, 'Testament of Cresseid', in *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. by Kindrick, ll. 64–91 (p. 158) criticizes her lust, and ll. 330–406 (pp. 166–68) details the transformation into a leper that precedes her complaint.

yong woman, & sche was doughter unto Calcas þe sotyl Trojan; & sche was ful bewteous & well drawn & well nortred' (p. 125, l. 24–p. 126, l. 1). This Criseyde is not necessarily flawed at the outset, and, although he acknowledges her 'lyght corage' and that she 'clerly forgate Troylus, her fyrst lover', the poet does not blame her for her decision (p. 126, ll. 10–12). He represents an essentially *good* Criseyde who was beautiful and brought up properly, but who changed because her circumstances and acquaintances changed. His lesson focuses on Troilus's *choosing* an undesirable lover, not Criseyde's faulty character itself. After all, the belief on which the work is predicated, that someone's efforts and choices directly influence his or her destiny, makes it difficult to blame Criseyde entirely for Troilus's sadness. At the same time, this concept should equally allow the poet to blame Criseyde for her actions, but he does not, indicating his sympathy for her predicament.

Other examples suggest that he more broadly amplifies negative commentary about *any* individuals guilty of offensive conduct. In particular, unnatural behaviours define not only Pasiphaë's sexual sin but also men's political transgressions. For instance, he depicts the traitors Antenor and Calchas as violently aberrant individuals, heaping upon them a scorn not found in Christine's *Othea*. Christine associates Antenor with 'Traÿson faulse et desloyalle' (Deceitful and disloyal treason) (Ch. 95, l. 4); her traitor Calchas commits 'infinies malices' (infinite misdeeds) (Ch. 81, l. 3), and is 'soubtilz et mauvais' (subtle and wicked) (Ch. 81, l. 19). The *Bibell*-poet's criticism goes one step further by cursing Antenor and any who would aid him:

Tyrannye & tresoun is all hys tresoure.
Deth were he wurthy þat such on wold save
When he seth hym stand in myscheyf & doloure. (p. 139, l. 1–3)⁹⁴

The *glose* echoes the desire that such men be exiled or put to death (p. 138, ll. 15–16). In the poet's view, treason is unnatural, for he marvels that Antenor can scheme against Troy when, 'naturally, he is a Troyan borne' (p. 139, ll. 5). He reacts with similar amplified vitriol toward Calchas:

Loke þu hate Calcas by any maner wey,
Whose malicious tresoun hathe pathes infynyght,
All his conjectur is sett realmez to betreye;
Between men he tretyth pees, when he wold þei schold fyght.
Fundacioun of falshed, he mey be cald ryght.
Treytours & flaterers take of hym þe ground
When þei, by sotle tresoun, regyons wyl confound. (p. 121, ll. 21–27)

⁹⁴ I have replaced Gordon's typo of 'myscheyf' with the BL, MS Harley 838 reading.

His Calchas is not only a despised traitor but also the 'Fundacioun of falshed' (p. 121, l. 25) and primary exemplar for other 'Treytours & flaterers' (p. 121, l. 26). The last lines of the *texte* and the *glose* add to Christine's account the reminders that Calchas was a 'false tratour' whose 'false tresouns' harmed empires (p. 122, ll. 10–12). The *Bibell*-poet vilifies traitors who deserve it, and proclaims that anyone who imitates them must be punished severely, even with death.⁹⁵ In light of his scathing criticism of these men, which makes obvious the social dangers of imitating them, the *Bibell*-poet's negative attitudes toward certain women emerge similarly as driven by his desire for exemplary cohesion. The fact that he sympathizes with some women and viciously berates some men indicates that he reacts to an exemplar's good or bad traits more than to his or her gender. Despite his reintroduction of some antifeminist attitudes, he embraces unquestionably good women exemplars such as Diana, Io, Cassandra, and the Sibyl (among others),⁹⁶ allows sympathy for Criseyde, and equally attacks men who exemplify improper behaviours. As a whole, the *Bibell* at least implicitly encourages the open-minded analysis of people as individuals, without solely relying on antifeminist stereotypes about the weaknesses and frailties of women.

Instead, the poet warns readers to beware of their *own* weaknesses in much the same way that he emphasizes Troilus's fault for his misery as stemming from the inability to recognize a fickle woman. Of course, Christine likewise conveys the basic lesson that readers must be discerning in matters of love, but the *Bibell*-poet is more insistent that fault lies squarely with the foolish male lover, not the woman:

If naturall inclinacioun prese uppon þe soo,
 Pat from þi delyte þu meyst not absteine,
 But þat þu must habandoun þe unto cupido,
 Beware of Cresida; þi love from her restreyn,
 Whose fykell hert is of stedfastnes bareygn.
 Pu schalt not ha[n] myn avyse with suyche on þe acqueynt
 As wyl, for þi trew hert, reward þe love feynt. (p. 125, ll. 17–23)

⁹⁵ If Gordon's proposed date of c. 1450 for the translation is correct, the amplified criticism of traitors could also reflect current political discourses on treason, for example, the claim that traitors to the crown were responsible for Henry VI's misrule in the 1440s, or a general concern that self-interest was replacing the common good in political decision-making. These issues were present in both literature and political debates, as shown by Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship*, pp. 40–42, 263–69.

⁹⁶ On good women in the *Othea* generally, see Christine de Pizan, *Letter of Othea*, trans. by Chance, pp. 121–33; and Warren, *Women of God and Arms*, pp. 70–72.

He acknowledges that there may be a 'naturall inclinacioun' that pressures man to love, but he also asserts that one may 'absteyne' or 'restreyn' himself (p. 125, ll. 17, 18, 20). Love itself is not unnatural, but neither is it an undeniable imperative, so man's failure to abstain when he should effectively causes his own misery. Like the poet's treatment of other exemplars, his alterations derive largely from the manipulation of source material to construct more cohesive exempla that emphasize how the reader's actions can prevent misfortune. The *texte* here also exemplifies the fraught relationship between teacher and student in Othea's forthright announcement that, should Hector acquaint himself with someone like Criseyde who will ill reward his true love, he 'schalt not ha[n] myn avyse' (p. 125, ll. 22). The poet shows Othea as quite willing to withdraw her counsel should Hector not meet her standards.

Such admonishments indicate how the poet changes his representation of Othea based on his assumptions about the counsellor-pupil relationship, which are different from Christine's. Whereas Christine places an uneasy trust in her reader to be motivated by internal desires for nobility and a virtuous reputation, the *Bibell*-poet promises success or failure as a motivational strategy to condition his reader to adopt behaviours that will produce honour instead of destruction.⁹⁷ The distinguishing feature of Othea's teaching style in the *Bibell* is that she frequently promises rewards for good behaviour or threatens abandonment if the reader breaks her rules. This approach emerges early: after saluting Hector in the first chapter, Othea cuts to the chase and asserts that she advises what is 'convenient' (favourable, appropriate) and 'most expedient' (advantageous, advisable) for Hector to know (p. 9, ll. 20–21). She claims that her letter warns 'Of vyces þat destroye many a creature, | Whereoff þe usage myght sone do þe harme' (p. 10, ll. 10–12). She continues to describe herself as 'sche wyche save from distres | All tho þat laboure my cunnyng to knowe | So þat no folye mey them overthrowe' (p. 10, ll. 19–21). She then urges, 'Wherfor, lest thyn honour disteyned be or synke, | On þis epistle I counsell the to thynke' (p. 11, ll. 11–12). Words like 'overthrowe' and 'synke' call to mind the action of Fortune's wheel turning unfavourably against Hector. The second chapter likewise promises that if the reader does not accept Temperance, 'Þe name fro hym wyll sone dye': not only will he fail to achieve prowess but also any reputation he has will be lost (p. 14, l. 22). None of these claims has precedent in Christine's work. The *Bibell* essentially threatens that failing to follow Othea's counsel will result in the destruction of the reader's reputation or even his death, leading to a significantly more explicit critique of Hector's worthiness since, after all, he failed.

⁹⁷ Krueger, 'Christine's Anxious Lessons', addresses the inherent uncertainty in writing advice texts and its effects on Christine's works.

Similar threats are found regularly throughout the *Bibell*, all products of the poet's invention, in which Othea assures the reader of her displeasure if he ignores her. For instance, she vows that if he behaves like 'lewd Leandre' and privileges bodily pleasure, 'then schold varyaunce | Twen the & me aryse' (p. 69, ll. 15–16). A striking example appears in the poet's promise of misfortune and death if Hector fails to unite Minerva's virtuous chivalry with Pallas's wisdom:

Unto þis Mynerve lett Pallas be knett,
Yff þu desyre kunnyng for to have;
For by hyr mayst þu purchace sotyll wytte,
Wyche necessite mey thy body save,
Where els by infortune þu myght be leyd in grave
Longe or þu were in prowes att þe poynt,
Wyche schold cause me with the be owt of joynt. (p. 32, ll. 20–22)

The *Bibell* advocates the identical concept of educated, virtuous chivalry that was emerging as the fifteenth-century ideal. Moreover, Othea counsels Hector that this combination of virtues is essential to protect his life or else he may well die 'or' (before) he achieves the height of prowess.⁹⁸ Such a disappointment would then cause Othea to be 'owt of joynt', as one's nose might get out of joint, or broken away from him.⁹⁹ In other words, Othea would distance herself from her wayward student, which is both a reaction to and evidence of his imprudence. For the *Bibell*-poet, wise action constitutes the alternative to being at the mercy of 'infortune', which he implies is the result of not combining virtues as Othea advised, instead of an effect of bad luck or Fortune's capriciousness. He has revised Othea's approach to accord with the Proem's stated goals to arm man with 'prudent pol-ecye' (p. 6, l. 9) and help him forestall the turning of Fortune's wheel. His Othea consistently reminds readers — not only Hector but also his own audience — how to exercise prudence and escape 'infortune': simply follow her advice.

Although most of the poet's cautionary comments simply draw on the moral content in Christine, he introduces two new ways of classifying the work's exemplars. The first is the categorization of sins as unnatural. The poet chastises Busiris, Pygmalion, Pasiphaë, Antenor, and Jason as either 'unkynd' or 'innatural', and only Busiris has precedent in Christine's *Othea* for this label. The poet's adaptive translation thus operates in consonance with his Proem, which framed the work with natural and humanly constructed tripartite systems. Listing these systems together implies that the moral, political, and social lessons transmitted in the

⁹⁸ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v., *er* (prep.), def. 1a.

⁹⁹ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v., *joint* (n.1), defs 1b, 1c.

Bibell are, like God's division of the earth and man's soul, natural. The poet exercises an Aristotelian impulse to frame vices as unnatural and virtues as natural, similar to the ways that Giles of Rome used Aristotelian concepts to assert that social hierarchies are naturally ordained.¹⁰⁰

The *Bibell*-poet's second interpretive addition is the analysis of certain transgressions as the result of presumption or the challenge of natural hierarchies. For instance, Midas's judgement against Phoebus (which earned him asses' ears) counsels the reader not to judge a powerful man foolishly. The poet inserts into Christine's chapter the claim that Midas exemplifies presumption by avowing, 'Suche a reward ffor a ffoole is mete | When he presumeth to take judiciall seete' (p. 48, ll. 22–23). The *glose* offers further criticism that 'some ffoole presumeth to juge folely ayen th'entent off sum myghty prince, wyche after punyscheth hym' (p. 49, ll. 13–15).¹⁰¹ In essence, the good knight ought not trust a fool's judgement or ever give a foolish judgement. The poet also ascribes to presumption Ganymede's attempt to best Phoebus in a contest of strength. Although Christine's *texte* focuses on playful striving in a game, the *Bibell*-poet adds a series of sterner warnings:

Never with þi better coveyte for to deele,
In ernest nor in game pleying folly;
Lewd & veyn presumpcioun hathe overthrown feell. *excellent men*
Þowgh þi better suffre þe, yett deell curteysely.
As resoun requireth, forbeyre hym reverently.
Þi eye to Ganymedes have alwey regard.
For hys grett presumpcioun, what was his reward!
(p. 84, l. 26–p. 85, l. 6)

The *glose* reiterates the lesson that Hector must 'presume not folly to deele with hys strenger or hys better' for that will lead to misfortune (p. 85, ll. 13–15). Such messages against presumption and, to a lesser degree, covetousness speak to the *Bibell*-poet's implied audience of the knightly ranks or below, who may be negotiating new kinds of social possibilities. The poet admonishes them against overreaching, as if to avoid challenging the *status quo* of social hierarchies at the same time that he offers broad lessons in self-improvement.

But the *Bibell*-poet's Othea does not become a caricature that only nags or threatens a wayward pupil. She also asserts that certain benefits such as praise and power arise from following her advice. For example, after noting that Perseus

¹⁰⁰ See Rigby, 'Aristotle for Aristocrats and Poets', pp. 273–76, on Giles's use of natural philosophy to justify the prince's rule and humanly created hierarchies.

¹⁰¹ I have corrected a typo in Gordon's edition 'thenent', based on the manuscript reading.

conquered Medusa through 'sotyll conjecture | Of wysedom', Othea advises, 'Hys steppis looke þu foulo [follow] as neer as þu can, | Wyche wyll cause þe to be dred of best [beast], foule [bird] & man' (p. 87, ll. 14–20).¹⁰² The poet calls attention to the act of modelling oneself on a hero's 'wysedom' with the promise that emulating Perseus will assure the reader a powerful position. Similarly, if the reader imitates Mars's warrior virtues (again, 'þe steppis foulo'):

For to the schall many a prynce lowte,
Wyche schall the cause to be had in mynd
Above all knyght3 unto þe worldes eend. (p. 29, ll. 5–7)

The reader also must 'example take' and 'pursue þe trew condicioun' of Bellerophon, who valued truth as the highest good, 'yff þu wyll atteyne to prowes' (p. 59, l. 26–p. 60, l. 4).¹⁰³ These statements recall the Proem's assurances that the reader will gain advancement in this life and spiritual sustenance if he 'þe steppis wyll foulo of þis lecture' (p. 6, ll. 13), and they stress the promise of future reputation for replicating exemplars' good behaviours. However, the poet does not simply issue dull repetitions of the same general reward. When he treats Isis, he emphasizes an agricultural metaphor present primarily in Christine's illumination: the reader must 'graffe' (graft) to his heart 'her magnificens' so that he might 'off prowes have frewte infinyght' (p. 47, ll. 21–24); *texte*, *glose*, and *moralite* each contain a reference to grafting, giving the chapter coherence.¹⁰⁴ The image constitutes a charming turn for our supposedly incompetent poet, and it demonstrates that there is an aesthetic element to his adaptation that occasionally offsets the pedagogical push to always remind the reader of the necessity of virtues.

Throughout the *textes* in the *Bibell*, the poet consistently repeats, through Othea's voice, that rewards or failures come from one's own moral *choices*. Hector becomes the obvious test, and the poet indisputably asserts that his death was

¹⁰² I have emended an erroneous transcription by Gordon, in which reading 'foule' as 'foulo' led him to correct the line to 'best & felow man' (*A 'Lytill Bibell of Knyghthod'*, ed. by Gordon, p. 87n).

¹⁰³ In addition to the examples cited here, there are many others; see, for instance, the *Bibell*-poet's treatment of Diana and chastity, which contains both the promise that if he is chaste, Hector's honour will 'avaunce' and the threat that if not, he will fall into misfortune (p. 45, ll. 10–16).

¹⁰⁴ On the illumination, see Hindman, *Christine de Pizan's Epistre Othea*, pp. 92–93, and plate 24. Christine's *texte* also puns on *ediffier* (Christine de Pizan, *Epistre Othea*, ed. by Parussa, Ch. 25, l. 5 as 'to educate' or 'to graft', and the *Bibell*-poet's translation acknowledges the subtleties of the term.

caused by his disobedience, not by Fortune or anyone else. In a major departure from Christine, the *Bibell's* Othea pronounces:

Atrops schal withdraw hys hand to þu disobey	<i>until</i>
Kyng Priamus, þi fader [...]	
For to þis performed be, deth schal ey þe spare.	<i>until</i>
(p. 133, ll. 6–12)	

The *Bibell*-poet imagines that the Fate Atropos pauses in cutting Hector's life thread until he disobeys Priamus, who believed Andromache's prophetic vision and attempted to counsel his son away from battle on the day of his demise.¹⁰⁵ This original image of Atropos brings to fruition all the other dominant notions of avoiding misfortune or stopping Fortune's wheel with the radical assertion that death would spare Hector were he more virtuous. In the *Bibell's* formulation, the stability of the Trojan empire rests on good counsel, and in Hector's case, his worship, prowess, and survival all depend on whether or not he heeds wise advice. In turn, the poet underscores that Hector failed to learn not only from Andromache and Priam but also from Othea's letter, which advocates against the decision to go into battle *and*, in the next chapter, the specific behaviour of coveting a dead man's armour that made Hector vulnerable to the fatal blow, which the *Bibell* overtly introduces as teaching him how to 'escape | Þe grett stroke of Atrops' (p. 134, ll. 11–12). In Christine's *Othea*, critique of Hector is largely subtle and implied,¹⁰⁶ but the *Bibell*-poet makes it explicit: Hector could have avoided an early death had he followed the advice of his counsellors.

The *Bibell*-poet's alterations to the chapters on Andromache and the Sibyl point to the tensions between viewing women counsellors as essential and understanding that antifeminist attitudes need reforming before such counsellors can be accepted. Andromache becomes part of a marriage metaphor for counsel that points to the need for Hector to accept well-intentioned counsel. Christine's

¹⁰⁵ Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis, *Middle English Dictionary Online*, s.v., *to* (prep.), def. 8. Atropos also is synonymous with death in both Christine's *Othea* and the *Bibell* (ch. 34); note that although Atropos is traditionally feminine and clearly female in *Othea* manuscript illuminations, the *Bibell*-poet renders Atropos masculine; the same conflation appears in *The Assembly of Gods*, ed. by Chance, ll. 442–48 (p. 42), and 1403–21 (p. 70), which also draws directly on the *Othea*.

¹⁰⁶ See Krueger, 'Christine's Anxious Lessons', pp. 20–21, who detects an implicit criticism of Hector in the depiction of his death and the final warnings to the reader, two moments that indicate Christine's doubt about the efficacy of her work to reform her audience. Abray, 'Imagining the Masculine', observes a similar pessimism that leads Christine to more openly criticize Hector in *Mutacion* and the *Cité des dames*.

Andromache derives her authority from her visions and from being a 'sage et bien condicionnee' (wise and well-disposed) woman (Ch. 88, l. 15), whose example authorizes counsel from 'autres femmes bien apprises' (other well-educated women) (Ch. 88, l. 5). By contrast, the *Bibell*-poet legitimizes Andromache's counsel through her very position as Hector's wife and partner:

Disprase not nor dispseye þi wyff & lady dere,
 All-though sche to þe schew þe secrete of her hert.
 For after þu hast chosen her for to be þi feer, *spouse*
 þe goddes it accord þu meyst nott asterte. *escape*
 Andromak schal labour þi purpose to convert,
 To whose holsome conceyll I wold þu schold applye,
 For lytel knowest þu what is þi destenye. (p. 131, ll. 1–7)

The *Bibell* emphasizes spousal counsel and indicates that once a man has chosen his wife, he may not escape her. A potentially antifeminist comment about a wife's pervasive influence is reinterpreted positively: Othea does not *want* Hector to reject Andromache's advice. The *texte* not only links husband and wife as a couple with common interests, but it also connects Andromache and Othea as sharing the same purpose of urging Hector to avoid his death; both wife and counsellor are motivated by the same goals.

More telling of the poet's interests in women's counsel, the *Bibell* exploits the juxtaposition of Andromache and the Sibyl to authorize Othea's counsel as an efficacious didactic mode. Andromache's attempt at persuasion detailed in the *glose* is far different from Othea's, and less effective: 'Sche wept tendrely & sykyng [sighing] pytuosely, sche schewed hym her visioun and advertyzed & conceyled hym to be owte of þe feeld þat dey' (p. 131, ll. 11–13). Although 'schewed' can simply refer to an act of telling or teaching, in 'showing' Hector her vision and attempting to 'convert' his purpose, Andromache more closely resembles the Sibyl who 'schewed' Augustus a vision of Christ and converted him to Christianity (p. 145, l. 11). The *Bibell*-poet specifies not just that Augustus learned from a woman, as in Christine's *texte* (Ch. 100, l. 4), but also that he learned how to *amend* his life:

Augustus þe emperour, for all hys conceyl wyse,
 Of a woman schall lerne [h]is lyff to amend.
 Disdeygne not þis pystle, þough I to þe it send.
 (p. 144, ll. 23–25)¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ The emendation of *is* to *his* is my own.

Women's counsel is located outside 'all hys conceyl wyse', separate from traditional forms of authority, but it alone had the power to reform the emperor's ways. This final chapter, therefore, extends Christine's *texte* to grant women's counsel a generous influence that supersedes all other forms, which simultaneously authorizes Othea's advice and the *Bibell* as a conduct manual. In light of the word choices in the Andromache chapter, the poet also here acknowledges that the work's central goal is the conversion of the reader's attitudes to accept women counsellors. Of course, Christine sought a similar conversion, but the *Bibell*-poet demonstrates not only that he understands her project but also that he endorses it, by explicitly pointing out Hector's refusal to convert his views to align with Andromache's counsel in contrast to Augustus's amendment of his life according to the Sibyl's vision. Even though the final chapter implies that if good counsel fails, the pupil is at fault, Andromache's failure suggests that another tactic is necessary to arrest a student's attention and thereby bring the poet's students to accept a woman's counsel, in the absence of the divine vision of Christ that authorized the Sibyl. The *Bibell*-poet's forceful Othea represents that alternative approach, complete with threats designed to persuade the reader that he must heed the lessons the poet so vehemently delivers in Othea's voice.

The last chapter of the *Bibell*, as in the *Othea*, addresses the anxiety that must have plagued any author of advice literature the most: that the reader might dismiss or undervalue the work. For Christine, establishing precedents for women's wisdom justifies her own interventions in masculine affairs, and the exemplars of the Sibyl and Augustus constitute successful foils to Othea and her flawed pupil Hector. The final lesson about the ennobling power of true counsel implies, of course, that this collection itself contains intrinsic value, no matter the credentials of its author — a fact that holds true for the *Bibell*-poet and Scrope as well as for Christine. Yet the *Bibell*-poet also exhibits a higher level of anxiety about the work's reception, reflecting tensions in his identification with a woman authority figure. The preceding ninety-nine chapters forcefully articulated by his dominant, authoritative Othea suddenly are not enough to dispel perceived doubts that the reader (or author) may have about a woman's authority. The poet not only advises the reader not to disregard Othea's advice (a concept found in Christine's original), but he also adds the command that the reader should not disdain this letter, 'pough I to þe it send' (p. 144, l. 25). The *glose* adds similar lines unique to the *Bibell* in which Othea urges Hector 'þat he schold not disdeygne her wrytyng though sche, a woman, sent hyt to hym. No more ought non oþer good knyght disdeygne þe conseyll of a wyse woman' (p. 145, ll. 15–17). Not content to rest on the convention that truth ennobles the speaker, the poet inserts these extra defences of women's counsel specifically. Because of his awareness of antifeminist claims about

wicked women, some of which he illustrates in his exempla, he is more aggressive in defending the woman counsellor persona because it is only through his new Othea that his own voice emerges as a dominant force. It is as if inhabiting her persona enables him to erase any earlier anxieties or conventional postures of modesty and replace them with authoritative speech. Othea's insurances on the efficacy of her advice and the doom of those who fail to heed it demand a compliant reader, effectively reversing the fiction, characteristic of Christine and Scrope, of the lowly poet writing to superior patrons. By the end of the *Bibell*, the poet has invested so much in adapting the exempla to his own purposes that he cannot risk the reader dismissing *his* advice because of antifeminism toward Othea.

Unlike other English authors who paradoxically emphasize women's lack of authority and their humility as the means to gain beneficial influence over male characters, the *Bibell*-poet does not distinguish Othea as an 'other', and only in the last chapter does he acknowledge woman's potential lack of authority. He remakes Christine's image of an even-tempered but undeniably authoritative counsellor into his own more aggressive adviser. And unlike Christine or Scrope, he values only those women who are worthy counsellors and who consequently lend further authority to his adaptation of Othea's advice. By redrawing lines that separate bad women from good, and by introducing more negative views of men's behaviours, he challenges readers to consider not gender first but rather a character's qualities and actions. He attempts to construct a reader like himself who is aware of gender stereotypes but willing to dismiss them when circumstances warrant it. Crucially, his alterations also restrain any negative effects of the feminization of his authorial persona by clearly demarcating that Othea and the good women counsellors such as Andromache and the Sibyl are of a different class than the less ideal women exemplars. Acutely aware of gender stereotypes, he seeks to problematize them so that his feminization through identification with Othea becomes a positive, authorizing strategy.

Implicitly, like Scrope, the *Bibell*-poet uses the defence of gender to authorize his own literary intervention, but the two men differ in that the *Bibell*-poet identifies so completely with Othea that she becomes the vehicle for his own ideas about morality and the efficacy of advice manuals. She voices his anxieties about whether his reader will rise to the challenges the work offers, and his method of using her threats of ruin and promises of rewards exposes a central, often unacknowledged problem of mirrors for princes: if the advice is not cast forcefully enough, how can the poet be certain the reader will take it seriously?¹⁰⁸ At heart,

¹⁰⁸ That authors may have questioned the efficacy of mirror texts is evident even in the early fifteenth century. Krueger, 'Christine's Anxious Lessons', pp. 20–21, suggests Christine's latent

the *Bibell* is framed to address this problem. The Proem classifies the work's advice as essential lessons that will enable the reader to halt Fortune's wheel, giving the reader a pragmatic goal for adopting virtues. The poet then adapts the *Othea* to streamline the chapters into simpler (if occasionally reductive) lessons and to shape reader responses to his moral lessons through new commentary by Othea that assures the reader of her advice's efficacy. Through his changes to Othea in particular, the poet suggests his disillusionment with the humble supplications offered by authors of mirrors for princes, who, like Andromache, offer advice too passively for this poet's taste, a taste that has been shaped no doubt by recent trends in aristocratic advice and conduct manuals more generally. As the literary advice genres became concerned less with advancing the rise of princes and more with warning against the fall of princes, the *Bibell*-poet's concept of the woman counsellor also shifted, from one who hopes for the best for her reader to one who threatens the worst.

Such alterations reveal the poet's pessimism about his readers' capacity to interpret and follow his lessons, which may be the sign of his writing for an audience of lower status who may have less motivation, at least in theory, than Christine's noble audiences to practise morality for morality's sake. His new stance not only addresses his anxieties about advice more generally but also adopts strategies that may resonate more clearly with a varied reading public.¹⁰⁹ If women's influence on political and ethical discourses has been defined by offering advice insistently but respectfully, the *Bibell* Othea's aggressive threats challenge that submissive but still active model in order to insist upon her authority to all readers. The *Bibell*'s Othea therefore becomes unlike any other woman counsellor in the English mirrors for princes genre, as the poet inhabits her persona to combat any potential lack of diligence in his reader. She is the culmination of the interest in feminized counsel that I have been describing where men such as Gower and Chaucer devise women to give voice to challenging political counsel; in the *Bibell*, Othea is no longer entirely recognizable as Christine's persona but has become infused with the translator's own attitudes, anxieties, and concerns about the most effective ways to teach moral virtues from a feminized position.

pessimism about Hector's capabilities. Gower's *In Praise of Peace* (*Chaucerian Apocrypha*, ed. by Forni), adopts a more direct mode of advising than the narrative exempla in his earlier *Confessio Amantis*, perhaps indicating a realization that such advice texts might be too indirect to be effective.

¹⁰⁹ Dronzek, 'Gendered Theories of Education', pp. 144–47, demonstrates that punishment was a staple of medieval schooling, even for upper class children; I see the *Bibell* Othea's threats as the textual version of such punishment.

Thus, the *Bibell* should be best read as an adaptation of the *Othea* that seeks to resolve the ambiguities of Christine's original, and indeed of mirrors for princes in general, by offering straightforward lessons and blunt warnings to help readers identify virtuous actions and avoid misfortune. Paradoxically, his simplified exempla assert even more consistently than Christine's that exemplars and people must be judged not according to gender stereotypes, but rather by their individual actions. This perspective not only elevates the status of women in general but also defends the role of feminized counsellor as both advantageous and acceptable for men, rather than damaging to either masculinity or authority. By reading the *Lyttil Bibell of Knyghthod* as an adaptation rather than a flawed translation, we uncover not only the poet's intense investment in providing counsel but also the careful intelligence with which he makes Christine's exempla accessible to new readers. Medieval authors of advice literature repeatedly remind their readers that wise counsel can come from the unlikeliest of sources — in a similar vein, it would seem that the poet responsible for this 'bad translation' of Christine's *Epistre Othea* in fact should be counted among her most insightful readers.

CONCLUSION

In annexing Latin's cultural authority, vernacular literatures demonstrate their ability to do anything Latin can do, while marking their difference from Latin; asserting the prestige of Latin texts and *auctores*, they also seek to assimilate that prestige, in an endless shuttling between gestures of deference and gestures of displacement whose most obvious effect is to tie the theory and practice of vernacular writing permanently to the question of its status in relation to Latin.

Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor,
and Ruth Evans, *The Idea of Vernacular*, p. 322

Over the course of this book, I have suggested the various ways that the exemplary mode is important in literary texts that draw on mirrors for princes — to perceptions of women, to understandings of the author's role, and to the relationship between woman adviser and advising author. Writing in the 'mother tongue' enables this experimentation with female authority and simultaneous vulnerability. After all, the prominence of women counsellor figures is unique to vernacular advice to princes (as opposed to the Latin genre), and it allows poets to mark their difference from their sources. More specifically, the woman counsellor and the vernacular advice text suggest deference to masculine, Latinate authority at the same time that they challenge that authority. Turning our attention to such instances in which women provide authoritative political advice is critical to understanding the English literary tradition that sought to advise princes and protect poets while at the same time asserting the vernacular poet's status and competence. The woman counsellor thereby becomes the champion for vernacular authority that can 'shuttle' between deference to and displacement of Latin predecessors. She can figure a 'mother tongue' that is not merely vulnerable but also powerful and worthy of respect.¹

¹ Butterfield, after surveying the status of English and French in fifteenth-century England, remarks, 'English is not yet confident enough in its local identity to feel authorized as a written

At the most fundamental level, this observation holds true for the texts in my study, whether they are translated from Latin or French, especially because all draw on the Latin tradition of mirrors for princes. The looming of Latin authority may be most evident in Gower's combination of Latin glosses with English text, and in Christine de Pizan's glossing practices and citations of scriptural authorities. Yet both authors create a space for vernacular authority — Gower by developing English narratives in *Florent* and *Three Questions* that supersede and contrast with his Latin glosses, and Christine (and, in turn, her translators) by establishing women's wisdom as alternately contrast and complement to Latin, masculine authority. Chaucer more generally challenges authority in the *Legend of Good Women* by subverting his orders and adapting Alceste's rhetorical strategies to his own persona as he argues for women's important roles in masculine dynastic achievements while criticizing bad kings. He develops his poetic authority as independent from Cupid's hyper-masculine sense of aggressive, potentially tyrannical authority, and as more in tune with the strategies of his women characters. In the *Melibee*, too, Chaucer and the late medieval scribe of San Marino, Huntington Library, MS HM 144 engage with the question of who has the authority to offer political advice to a young lord, and the answer — Prudence — combines both the femininity and maternal position of the 'mother tongue' with the citations of masculine authority that persuade Melibee. In considering Scrope's translation of the *Othea*, most scholars have emphasized his displacement of Christine de Pizan, but he also shows deference to her in his fictional representation of her as a gentlewoman whose commission of the book facilitated the Duke of Berry's development as the flower of aristocratic chivalry. She becomes not feminine 'other' but an exemplar for Scrope's similarly bold intervention into a field that would traditionally have excluded him. Of all the authors, the *Bibell*-poet exhibits the least deference to his source, for he transforms Christine's poetic quatrains into rhyme royal stanzas (a distinctly English form), and he reintroduces antifeminist stereotypes; although the latter might be seen as deferring to Latin presentations of those women, the poet nevertheless defends others. Despite his departures from the *Othea*, it is ultimately Christine's titular woman counsellor who enables him to develop a strong advising voice and assert the authority of the work.

vernacular. It appeals to the notion of a mother tongue to justify its natural status but this notion confirms its vulnerability' (Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy*, p. 349). In my view, English vernacular poets use the woman counsellor to exploit this vulnerability and attempt to generate confidence in the vernacular.

It is also significant that these vernacular texts, which theorize methods for counteracting Fortune, use women counsellors to articulate the wisdom and virtues necessary to combat the capricious abstraction's ever-turning wheel. All mirrors for princes presume that actions are efficacious, and these late medieval works in particular call attention to the fact that 'Fortune' is not a tangible force in humans' lives but rather 'a cultural shorthand' for causality and human agency.² Gower foregrounds man's responsibility for his own fortunes and thus frames the *Confessio* as a work dedicated to helping readers cultivate virtuous habits and, consequently, better fortunes (Prol., 548–49). Through a military metaphor more appropriate to its chivalric focus, the *Lytel Bibell of Knyghthod* proposes similarly to arm its readers with prudent policy so that they may 'stye | þe whele off fortune to þe suppreme wonnyng' (*Bibell*, p. 8, ll. 3–4). Advice, prudence, and authoritative wisdom applied well similarly become the antidotes to what the Huntington *Melibee* scribe calls 'truste of ffortune' (HM 144, fol. 99^v). Virtuous human actions advised by women characters become the means to deny the agency of abstract Fortune and stabilize one's worldly position.

The women counsellors in *Feminized Counsel* are subject to humanly created gender stereotypes, a detail that enables poets to work through and challenge typical assumptions about gendered authority. By demonstrating that these stereotypes do not apply to their women counsellors, poets illustrate that universals cannot be taken out of context; they must be applied within specific situations to women, enemies, actions, and so on. Moreover, because poets must specifically defend women counsellors against gender stereotypes, depicting these women characters enables poets to defend counsel itself as essential, regardless of its source, and to implicitly argue for the validity and necessity of their own vernacular texts. Flying in the face of Latin traditions and gendered expectations paradoxically allows writers such as Gower, Chaucer, Christine, and their imitators or translators to assert that their works deserve as much authority as the traditions they have reinvented.

Of course, not all vernacular poets wrote as the ones in my study do, even when they sought to provide significant political advice. Lydgate, for example, enforces male-female boundaries and emphasizes the dullness/modesty *topos* instead. He also, more than any of the poets I have treated, is affiliated with an authoritative centre — whether that be the Church or his direct orders from aristocratic patrons. For vernacular poets without ties to such established forms of authority, women enable the exploration of authority and power through counsel. They exemplify virtues, reform recalcitrant princes, and instruct the reader in the

² Nolan, 'The Fortunes of *Piers Plowman*', p. 4.

interpretation and application of advice central to mirrors for princes. Women counsellors let poets depict challenges to a powerful man's authority without threatening him, and they force readers to grapple with the notion that advice, proverbs, and stereotypes are not universal truths. In other words, for poets with limited authority who wrote in the shadow of the Latin ecclesiastical and university traditions, women counsellors exemplified new conceptions of authority and demonstrated that cultural assumptions may not always hold true.

Although the deployment of the woman counsellor as a figure for the poet may be most noticeable in Christine's *Othea* because her gender is compatible with the counsellor's, the works by Chaucer, Gower, Scrope, and the *Bibell*-poet under consideration show that male writers did not always define masculine authority against women. Rather, they could also identify with a feminine persona and imagine her facilitating their own development of authority. Their views of gender did not require one-to-one correlations to biological sex, for they could conceive of a world in which their own voices best articulated advice through women characters. Feminine and masculine behaviours become less static and more flexible categories that describe the qualities and performances that people prioritize depending on circumstances. As feminized counsellors and poets illustrate, feminization is neither permanent nor negative but instead can be an enabling and pragmatic method to gain the authority to counsel while dispelling any threats to a pupil's (or patron's) superior authority. All the texts considered here challenge the male-female binary to explore issues of counsel, mercy, power, and authority as more complex and irreducible to masculine authority versus feminine weakness.

By featuring women as exemplars, these late medieval poets also raise the status of women. In ventriloquizing advice through women counsellors, they challenge antifeminist assumptions that all women are wicked, ignorant, and working toward men's ruin. Through exempla and narratives that assert the limitations of stereotypes, women counsellors become positive role models for both men and women. This identification with women and women's strategies suggests that at least these late medieval poets endorsed a view in which femininity can lead to authority and women can work with men to improve the state of an individual, of kingship and knighthood, and of the realm. That so many of the narrative successes in these tales hinge on women's interventions demonstrates that women counsellors such as Prudence, Peronelle, Othea, and the Sibyl have a crucial role to play not just as moral but also political authorities. They embody the claim that 'good advice enables the one who speaks it', a maxim that applies equally to the elevation of these vernacular texts to serious works of advice literature.

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